

dried up, half full by lymricks

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy fights the monsters too!, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, M/M, the POV switches now!

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-04

Updated: 2018-03-13

Packaged: 2022-04-21 15:21:50

Rating: Explicit

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 8

Words: 60,016

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Steve's been coming out here searching for a monster in the woods. He's finally found one.

"What do you want, Hargrove?"

1. I

Author's Note:

I'm doing a [tumblr prompt thing](#) and this is for number 16 ("Just talk to me"). I've got a few more to do and I'm leaving it open, but I'm putting this on here because it got long and honestly I'm still trying to figure out how tumblr works. Heed the tags!

HEY ALSO there is *unreal* art for this made by the fabulous @walter-sullivan-stubble on tumblr and it's [right here!](#) Please go look at it and reblog it because it's so stunning and perfect and I can't even deal with it.

Also, I frame everything with poems apparently, so here's where this title comes from:

"The riverbed, dried-up, half-full of leaves.
Us, listening to a river in the trees."
-Seamus Heaney

Sometimes, when the sun sets on Hawkins, and Nancy is busy with Jonathan, and his parents are home, cluttering the house with sounds and conversation, Steve gets into his car and drives. He drives to one of the farms that pepper Hawkins, drives out to the edges of it, knows he won't get caught by the farmer--doesn't care if he does. He drives out to the edges, to where farmland turns to trees, thick and dark and looming. He turns off his car, leaves the bat in the backseat, and goes and sits in the darkness.

Those are the kind of dark, lonesome nights that let him seem normal when he's in the hallways at school. Where he does his homework, and checks Nancy's math, and takes notes in English like he's going to understand the book. He does this, and he's *fine* the rest of the time, thanks, no worries. He can pick Dustin up, or drive him somewhere, or get burgers with him and talk about girls and not feel, at all, like his skin is going to crack open and spill whatever's inside him in a slow leak onto the sidewalk. He feels stretched thin and

dried out, and then he goes out into the woods and feels--alive.

It makes him feel like he did that night outside the bus, muttering *come on* as monsters circled. *Come ON*, every inch of him screams as he stares at the trees. He's tempting fate, maybe, but it feels like taking control. He sits in the darkness, woods around him, and listens to the sounds that a forest makes at night. Something skitters in the leaves, something walks by just at the edges of what's audible. There are insects all around, and sometimes one of them makes a noise just strange enough that it sounds *wrong*, like something that shouldn't be out in the woods at night. Steve feels his heart beat faster then, curls his fingers into fists, tips his head back, throat bared, and fucking waits for it.

Nothing ever comes, though. He backs his car out, drives home, accepts the kiss his mother presses to his cheek and a plate kept warm from dinner. Goes to bed. Goes to school. Makes it through another week. He can't keep doing this forever, but he can keep doing this for now. So he drives out to the edge of the world again and again, bares his throat to the dark forest, and waits.

~

In school on a Tuesday, Billy comes up to him, shoulders hunched, tense, angry. Steve can see the anger rolling off him, almost like he's vibrating with it. Today, Steve thinks, frantic and calm all at once, standing at his locker. Today Billy Hargrove is going to finish the job he started. He's going to be wrong--so wrong--but he doesn't know that yet.

Steve's face is almost entirely healed, just a little fading bruising, nearly invisible, around his temples remains. Nancy says she can only see it if she really looks for it. In the weeks he has healed, slowly, day by day, the strange looks from his teachers and his basketball coach have faded, too. His classmates stare less in the hallway--they still stare because Steve's always drawn attention, but it's more normal. Dustin has stopped acting like he's afraid to touch him.

No one can see it but Steve, right after he gets out of the shower, if he parts his wet hair just right, but there's going to be a *scar* on his *scalp* from the plate Billy smashed over his head and he can't decide

whether or not he thinks that's cool. It's not like he can show it to anyone.

Billy is standing at Steve's locker, just not saying anything, looking somewhere to the right of Steve's head. That's maybe the most unnerving part of it all. When Billy talks to him--in class, at practice, that night at the Byers's house--Steve always has his full attention, laser focused, blue eyes bright enough and sharp enough to cut glass. Now, Billy isn't looking Steve in the eye. Steve can't catch his gaze. He thinks that this is how he dies, in a hallway at school, once he'd finally started feeling safe.

"Sorry," Billy grinds out through clenched teeth, still not looking at him.

"What," says Steve, blankly, processing. He'd been bracing for a hit--*planting his feet*, as it were, but Billy's just said sorry, and Steve's brain is trying to catch up.

"I'm not fucking saying it again, Harrington," Billy says, still not looking at Steve. "Take it or fucking leave it."

Billy's close enough to him that Steve can smell the cigarette smoke clinging to his t-shirt, it's too cold for a t-shirt, Steve's brain reminds him. Billy's close enough to him that Steve can see the way some shorter strands of hair curl close to his face, at the edges of his jawline. Billy's close enough to him that Steve can smell his shampoo, that his brain can register that Billy's not wearing cologne today, which Steve knows because one time at the Byers's house, Billy had smashed his face in, gotten real close and personal. Which he's apologizing for. Now.

Oh.

"Oh," Steve says, slow, and Billy's still standing there coiled like he's ready to launch himself into space or shatter, Steve isn't sure which. "Uh," and Billy's not looking at him, close enough to smell. "I--that's ok, man. Thanks?"

Billy walks past him then, slams a freshman's open locker shut in the kid's face with enough force to silence the entire hallway. It's

probably bent. They're not supposed to slam the lockers like that because then they stop closing right. Steve's thinking all that, but mostly he's thinking that usually when Billy walks past him he checks Steve with his shoulder. He didn't, this time.

Steve's--not totally sure what to do with that information, actually. So he shuts his locker and he reads the notes Nancy gives him about the novel he can't wrap his head around, and he checks her math homework, because Steve's not great at school, but he's ok at math, and Nancy likes to make sure her work is perfect.

It's a Tuesday and it's fine.

~

Except then it's like, you know, Billy is just fucking everywhere Steve is. His car is outside the Byers's house when Steve swings by to pick up Dustin and Lucas--who aren't allowed to sleep over on account of some sort of family event. Steve's still trying to work out if it's the same family event or if it's two separate family events planned on the same day. Lucas and Dustin haven't been particularly clear on that front, so mostly Steve is picking them up and hoping he doesn't get invited to dinner. He has an especially hard time saying no to either of their mothers.

Billy's car is there, and Max appears in the doorway when he honks. Billy looks over at Steve, and Steve tries to catch his eye through their separate windows, to wave, but Billy's looking to the side of his head again, and when Steve waves Billy's jaw gets tight and then--nothing. He honks again, Max dives into the car, blocking Billy from Steve's view, and then they drive off.

Steve gets invited to dinner. He stays because he's a fucking sucker and Dustin's mom is so nice. It's separate family dinners, just in case anyone was fucking wondering.

~

When he leaves Dustin's house, the sun is long since set, cold air bites at whatever exposed skin it can find. Steve's cheeks will be red from it. He thinks of Billy in his t-shirt, thinks that he's supposed to go

straight home to his mother and her bright, full house. Picks a road instead, drives down it, a straight line until he's turning into a farm. He turns his headlights off when he drives past the house, keeps the music down. When he looks in the windows, the family inside isn't worrying about anything outside. Lucky them.

He drives out to the edge of their property, where civilization meets the forest, and the lab is somewhere out there, looming empty in the dark. He checks his bat out of habit, fingering the nails at the end of it before leaving it in his passenger's seat. He shuts the door to the beamer quietly, gently, nothing like Billy had shut the locker. He walks out into the forest, close enough to where his car is that he'll know if it's found, far enough he'd have to work to get to it, have to work to get away.

He settles down on the stump of a tree, shuts his eyes, listens. Waits.

For a long time there is silence, the sound of insects, just this side of *wrong*.

Then:

The roar of an engine, headlights that make Steve's eyes sting, even though they're still closed. The sound of a car door slamming. Steve opens his eyes and can't really see for the glare. "Is that you, Harrington?" calls a voice that Steve thinks he might recognize anywhere. *Yeah it's me*, his brain echoes, *Don't cream your pants*. Steve's been coming out here searching for a monster in the woods. He's finally found one.

"What do you want, Hargrove?"

"What are you doing?" Billy's voice is soft over the sound of his engine.

"Turn your fucking car off," Steve says, still trying to see Billy in the glare of the headlights. He's the outline of a person, standing there next to his still running car. Billy could jump in, could get away, but Steve is sure, suddenly, that he won't. Billy turns his car off, walks farther out into the trees.

“What’s wrong with you?” Billy asks, looking at him.

It’s the first time since that Tuesday, too many days ago now, that Billy has held Steve’s gaze. Steve’s breath leaves his chest in a rush, out here in the near pitch black, just the light of the moon, Billy’s eyes seem to glow bright bright blue. It’s almost unnerving. It’s almost the kind of wrong Steve’s looking for out here.

What is wrong with him? Steve doesn’t know. Monsters are real, he guesses. He didn’t know that before.

“Monsters are real,” Steve says, locked in under Billy’s eyes, unable to move, more honest than he wants to be.

Billy laughs, “Yeah?” he asks, “Tell me about it. Get in my car, Harrington, it’s freezing out here.”

Steve--does.

It’s when Billy opens the door that he sees it, the bruise blooming on Billy’s cheek, like the flower face of a many-toothed monster, purple and red and wrong. His eye is black, too, and if Steve squints, he can just make out bruises on Billy’s neck that look an awful lot like fingerprints. Billy offers him a cigarette.

“What’s wrong with *you*?” Steve asks.

Billy laughs, hollow and mean, “Monsters are real,” he mimics.

Steve, in his best low-voiced, dark-edged Billy impersonation says, “Yeah? Tell me about it.”

It is, he realizes, the first time he’s ever seen Billy laugh, really laugh like he means it. Steve feels warm all over from it, wants a repeat performance.

“I’m fucked up,” he says to Billy, because he’s said it to no one else. “I think I’m going to be cracked open and spill all my guts out, like fucking humpty-dumpty or whatever.”

“I’m fucked up. I could’ve killed you,” Billy answers. Maybe you should’ve, Steve doesn’t say, feeling small and dark and angry in

Billy's car on the edge of the world.

"My parents leave all the time and then they come back," Steve says, "I wish there wasn't a back and forth about it. I wish they could fucking pick one. I can't get a handle on it."

"My dad beats me," Billy answers, and Steve feels cold all over, like someone's pushed him into a snowbank, sees Billy's bruises even though the light from the car is gone with both doors closed. There's no second half to Billy's sentence.

"Billy--"

"Don't," Billy says, quick and mean. "I'll break your nose if you say it."

I'm sorry, Steve's brain screams, even though he did nothing wrong. He doesn't say anything for a while. There's the sound of the insects, and Billy breathing. "I do this a lot," Steve says.

"What?"

"The forest. I do this a lot."

"You're going to get eaten by a wolf or a bear or something."

"Maybe. You could come, though, again, if you wanted."

"I could come?" Billy's tone is laced with something that makes Steve blush. He's glad Billy can't see it.

"Maybe," he says, feeling reckless and like he's going to crack.

Billy laughs, loud and long. "Get out of my fucking car," he says.

Steve drives home. He pretends he doesn't see Billy follow him. It reminds him a little bit of what Nancy does, whenever she drives someone around. How she makes sure they get in their front door safe and sound before she drives off. It drives Steve crazy when she does it, all the waiting around, but when he turns around after he's closed the door, through the windows he watches the Camaro speed off. Steve's surprised how good it feels to know someone was making

sure he got in safe.

~

At practice three days later, Nick J--different from Nick T and Nicholas--checks Steve so hard he crashes to the ground. He doesn't offer Steve a hand up. Steve takes the hit, loves it, thinks that maybe he should plant his feet, but maybe he shouldn't. Pictures a bruise that might bloom on his shoulder and smiles.

After, in the locker room, after they've all showered and coach has disappeared from his office, Billy rounds on Nick J. "What the fuck was that?" he asks, low and dangerous.

"What?" says Nick J. Steve watches, straddling a bench, still toweling his hair, shirtless and in dry sweatpants.

"Harrington. You threw him on the ground and didn't help him up. What the *fuck* was that?"

"You do it all the time, Billy. Whatever," Nick J flips Billy the bird and turns to leave.

The sound Nick J's torso makes when Billy slams him into the locker echoes throughout the room. "You don't do it," Billy says, still low and dangerous. "Ever a-fucking-gain."

"Shit," Nick J says, and Steve sees him wince. "Whatever, ok, I won't do it."

Billy presses him harder, his arm across Nick's shoulders, digging an elbow in. "Apologize," he hisses, breath ruffling Nick J's hair.

"Sorry, Harrington," Nick J says. Billy lets him go and Nick J scrambles away. The door slams when he leaves. Suddenly it's just Billy and Steve in the locker room. They're both shirtless. Steve feels cold.

"What," he says, blankly, processing.

"Don't worry about it, Harrington," Billy says, tugging a t-shirt on over nasty bruises up and down his left side. Steve sees them,

catalogs them, knows their cause even though he isn't sure that he wants to know it.

"Bye," Steve says dumbly when Billy walks out, still straddling the bench, toweling his stupid hair.

~

Billy is just--he's everywhere. Steve can't seem to get away from him. He's outside the AV club in the frigid, frozen air that threatens snow. This year the cold seems like it'll never break, like spring is a myth that comes from the coasts far away from Hawkins, Indiana. Steve feels like the edges of the town are walls. A world outside of Hawkins, with the sky this grey, the threat of snow this heavy, seems impossible.

Billy's outside AV club, he's obviously in basketball practice, he's near Steve's locker when Steve gets there in the morning, near Steve's locker when Steve stays at school as late as he can, dreading in a way he cannot name a warm house filled with his parents, a cold house empty of them.

"Harrington," Billy says, a few days after the thing with Nick J, standing at Steve's locker, looking somewhere to the left of Steve's head, never meeting his gaze.

"Yeah?" Steve says, and he's almost surprised by the genuine curiosity he can feel blooming in his chest. He can see Nancy off behind Billy, hovering, unsure. He doesn't call her over.

"You going to the edge of the world tonight?" Billy asks.

"Maybe," Steve says. "Who wants to know?"

"Me," says Billy, and then he meets Steve's eyes, and Steve can't breathe for the focus of all that blue.

"Yeah," Steve says, embarrassed to realize he's breathless. "I'll pick you up. 9."

There's the ghost of a flinch in Billy's shoulders, but he nods. "You know where--"

"I've driven Max home," Steve says, and Billy walks away without saying anything else. Steve feels like the air does before a storm, heavy, ready to shatter. Loves it.

~

Just before Steve pulls up outside of the Hargrove house, he turns his headlights off. He doesn't know why he chooses to do it, just that he knows he should. He never does with when he picks up Max, but picking up Billy seems--different.

He waits.

Billy comes out of the house, does something with his hand that Steve understands in a deep down part of himself. He drives around the corner, parks his car in front of a neighbor's house, gets out and waits again. Billy pulls up in the Camaro.

"Get in," Billy says.

Steve doesn't say he was supposed to pick Billy up. That's not, he thinks, how this works. He opens the door, feeling ready and then--falters, feels himself gasp, wishes he'd stopped it.

Billy's face is--bad.

Billy doesn't look at him, he wipes at his nose--it's still bleeding--and stares straight ahead. Steve hesitates for a second before he climbs in the car. There's a feeling like anger and helplessness building in the pit of this stomach. This time he doesn't want to say he's sorry.

They're nearly to the farm before he realizes Billy's crying.

It seems involuntary, like Billy's not even really aware of it. At first, Steve had thought he'd been swiping at his bloody nose--and he is, sometimes, but his hand every now and again is too high, and Steve's staring, realizing Billy's swiping at tears on his cheeks. Steve doesn't know how to handle that, doesn't know if there's a way to handle it.

"Monsters are real," Steve says into the silence in the car.

"Yeah," says Billy, doesn't add *tell me about it*, doesn't need to. Steve

swallows hard into the ensuing silence.

When they get to the farm, Steve climbs out before Billy's even turned the car off. He regrets telling Billy he could come out here with him. Steve does this to be alone, to feel alive. Billy's--Billy is a witness, is a weight, is something Steve has trouble understanding. He doesn't know what they're doing out here together. Steve walks out into the darkness, leaves Billy in the car behind him, finds a spot to stand and closes his eyes.

Around him, the forest is silent. Behind him, the sound of the Camaro's engine dies away suddenly.

Steve keeps his eyes closed, hears footsteps, knows Billy stops right behind him, just shy of touching him. Steve can feel him, can feel the heat off of him, can smell his shampoo, and cigarettes, and faintly, a little bit of cologne.

Steve feels like he's going to shatter. He pictures the bruises on Billy's face, wonders what must be underneath the shirt.

"Billy," he says.

Billy's voice, when he speaks, sound wrecked and broken. Out here in all this nothing, Steve knows, the two of them could shatter. He wonders if anyone would notice Billy's gone. "Just--" Billy says, raw and breathless, "Talk to me, Harrington."

And monsters are real, so Steve turns around and holds up his hand, Billy presses his cheek into Steve's palm. And monsters are real, so Steve is tender, endlessly so, when he leans in and presses his lips to Billy's, feels more than sees Billy start to collapse.

"I don't want to talk," Steve says against Billy's mouth. "I'm so tired of talking."

"Me too," Billy admits, and he's so *pliant* that when Steve's fingers trace the side of his throat, he bares it. Steve has never seen Billy like this, boneless, at someone else's mercy.

Steve kisses over his jaw, presses open mouthed kisses down Billy's throat, where bruises had been days before. Billy's face is fucked up,

so Steve stays away from that as much as he dares, except once, when he realizes Billy's eyes are closed and he presses his lips to the corner of Billy's left eye where a bruise blooms.

Billy makes a sound that makes Steve's stomach hurt, so he does it again, shifts and ducks his head lower to press a kiss to the corner of Billy's mouth. He's *gentle*, can't stop himself from it. He slides a hand under Billy's t-shirt, cold fingers against warm skin. Billy's almost hot to the touch. Steve wonders if he's going to get burned.

"Didn't know you swung that way," Billy says as Steve's fingers trail lower, pushing at the waistband of Billy's jeans. Steve hears Billy suck a breath in. "Thought you were all about the princess."

Steve smiles, feels wicked, bites Billy's lower lip, "I came out here looking for monsters," he says, instead of an answer.

"I might be one," Billy answers, and his eyes are open and boring into Steve's when Steve looks up. Billy's staring at him through his eyelashes.

"It's ok, man," Steve says, and his voice is so soft it surprises him. "I don't mind."

"Ok," Billy says.

Steve backs him up until Billy's back hits a tree. There out here in the middle of fucking nowhere, and Steve thinks for a second that if the farmer finds them, if his family finds them, they're probably both dead. He stares into Billy's eyes for a second, makes Billy hold his gaze, and it's like staring right into the sun, only somehow more dangerous. "Fuck," Steve says, quiet. Billy pushes forward, kisses him hard.

"Come *on*," Billy hisses, an echo of something Steve said once, enticing danger.

Steve's on his knees before he really thinks it through. He looks up at Billy in the darkness, can just make him out in the moonlight. Billy's blue eyes are huge. "I've never done this before," Steve says, undoing the button on Billy's jeans, sliding down the zipper.

“Shit,” Billy breathes, “Harrington are you--” there’s a pause, a stutter in Billy’s breathing, like it isn’t a natural question, “Are you fucking sure?”

“I want to,” Steve says, and he feels awkward about it, but not awkward enough to stop. He’s had his dick sucked before, he figures he can work out the rest. Billy shifts his hips--jeans out of the way, he’s not wearing any boxers, something hot burns low in Steve’s stomach. Steve licks his palm, and on his knees on the edge of the fucking world, he wraps a hand around Billy experimentally, just wanting to see what it feels like. Billy’s a warm weight in his palm and Steve shifts his weight, leans forward and drags his tongue along the length of Billy’s cock.

Billy makes a sound that has Steve hard in his jeans. He slides his tongue around the head, shifts forward, wraps his lips around Billy and palms himself in his jeans, shifting and needing the pressure, everything suddenly too much and not enough.

It’s what Billy’s doing, though, that really gets to Steve. When Steve peers up through his eyelashes, he’s the laser target of Billy’s focus again. Billy’s lips are parted, his eyes are blown wide. Steve can see the rise and fall of his chest when he pulls back and licks his lips. Billy shudders a little bit, reaches a hand out like he’s not sure.

Steve digs his nails into Billy’s hip, and Billy whines low in the back of his throat. Steve grabs Billy’s wrist, guides Billy’s hand to his hair. Billy’s fingers curl, and he tugs just this side of too hard now that Steve’s given permission. Steve wraps his lips back around Billy’s cock, curls his fingers back around him, twists his wrist.

Steve has spent a lot of weeks feeling out of his depth in a lot of ways. He’s spent a lot of time driving out to the edge of the woods and waiting for something to eat him alive. It’s been a sort of helplessness. When Billy comes apart, though, Steve thinks that he’s never felt more powerful. It’s his name on Billy’s lips, on Steve’s terms. Billy stands against the tree for a moment after like the tree and Steve’s hand on his hip are the only things holding him up.

~

Billy never stops being everywhere. It's especially frustrating in basketball practice, where every foul Steve draws, every thrown elbow, every potentially iffy check meets with Billy's ire in the locker room after practice. Teammates find themselves corned, warned away from Steve, or hit just as hard by Billy at the next practice. A few weeks go by like this, with some sort of fragile connection pulling Billy back into his orbit. It's like Billy can't help himself. Steve thinks the way Billy goes after the rest of the team is probably just an excuse for him to stand a little closer to Steve. It's still strange to watch all that rage directed at someone else. Steve has never felt such a mixture of protected and irritated--and turned on--in his entire goddamn life.

They're standing outside the gym after school, after practice. The lights in the parking lot have long since come on. They're the last ones here, have been for a while, but they're just kind of standing there. Steve doesn't want to leave first and it doesn't seem like Billy wants to leave at all. So it gets darker around them, and a little colder, and mostly they're silent.

Billy's nursing a new bruise on his jaw, standing awkwardly to take pressure off his ribs, which in the locker room were a patchwork of the kind of bruising you get from being kicked. Steve knows this mostly because of the times he's had his ass handed to him by people he now lets into his life. Steve isn't sure what all this means. Isn't sure that one blowjob in the forest on a night they were both a little out of their minds is the sort of thing you build shit around, but it's just--he kind of wants to build something here. Maybe that's why he doesn't want to leave. Or maybe he just doesn't want to leave Billy alone, huddled outside the gym with his fucked up ribs and the bruises he explains away, under the flickering lights because the city won't give the public schools enough money for new bulbs. There's a whole dark world out there. It's better when there's someone with you. Steve can't figure out what all this means, but this feels important.

Right now, they exist in a vacuum. They've carved out spaces for themselves to be whatever it is they're doing, with Billy having Steve's back in a way Steve doesn't really understand, but can no longer imagine going without. It's lonely out there, beyond this space

and these flickering lights. Steve's tired of trying to figure out the forest alone. "Billy?" Steve asks, when the silence is too much.

Billy's smoking, he licks his lips when he looks at Steve, and there's an echo of a threat there. He's looking Steve in the eye though, and there's something vulnerable in that, too. Steve has the distinct sense he's holding his own life in his hands, that if he fucks this up Billy Hargrove might kill him.

"What, Harrington?"

"Are you all right?"

Billy looks away from him then, and Steve misses the warmth of his gaze even though he didn't really know he'd had it. "No," Billy says finally, clenching his teeth. His jaw ticks.

"Can I do something?"

"Just talk to me, Harrington," Billy says, still looking away.

Steve is surprised to realize he isn't tired of talking anymore. He steps in front of Billy--there's no one around, he checks--and grabs Billy's jaw, mostly gently, trying not to hurt. He looks down at Billy and tugs until, reluctantly, Billy meets his eyes. They're so fucking blue. "I can do that," Steve says. "We can stay out here all night. Or you can come back to my place. I don't care. Don't go home."

Billy tries to look away and Steve moves with him, like he's playing basketball, keeps his eyes locked with Billy's. "I have to go home eventually, Harrington," Billy bites out, and he's looking for a fight, tense again, Steve can feel it.

"I know," Steve says, stepping closer, "But it doesn't have to be right now, right? I have a lot to fucking say."

Steve doesn't let Billy look away, doesn't let go of his jaw, and for several long, quiet moments they stand there. Steve has the distinct feeling he's holding his own life in his hands. He has the growing feeling that he might be trying to grab onto Billy's, too. He doesn't want to let go.

The minutes tick by. Then, slowly, *slowly*, the tension drains from Billy until he steps forward, and it's like the hand Steve's got curled around his jaw is holding him up. He's pliant under Steve's fingers, pliant when Steve steps closer, loose limbed when Steve backs him against the bricks and holds him up there. This is a different sort of the edge of the world.

"Monsters are real," Steve says, which means different things for different people. "I got you," which isn't what he wants to say, but is what he absolutely means.

"Yeah?" Billy asks. "Tell me about it."

Steve does.

2. II

“Get up.”

Billy thinks that he will never be able to shake the memory of the disgust in his father’s voice, thinks he wouldn’t need to hear it to know it was there, thinks that so many nights end like this, with his palms scraped up from trying to break his fall.

They’re in the driveway, which is unusual and leaves Billy’s palms stinging from the gravel. His father had come out to meet him when he’d driven up. Billy had still had his keys in his hand when he first went sprawling. The house looms above them and Billy thinks that Max is up there somewhere, in one of those windows. He keeps quiet.

“Get. Up,” his dad says again, and gathering himself takes a second, but Billy knows an order when he hears one, and so he stands, palms stinging and with hair in his face. He doesn’t look up at his dad. He just stands there, waiting, his shoulders around his ears.

There’s frost on the grass, or snow, maybe. Billy focuses on that as he stands there, waiting for whatever comes next. They’re in the driveway, probably because Susan’s in the house with Max, and Billy thinks they must know, but all four of them play this game like what happens in this house is some sort of secret, like they’re all as fucking stupid as his dad must think they are.

“I asked you to pick up a gallon of milk before you went to school this morning,” his dad is saying and Billy fucking *knows*. They’ve already been *over this* and he doesn’t understand why the conversation has to continue. He knows how this ends: this ends with his dad going inside and Billy, shaken, off kilter, will storm through the grocery store and come home with a gallon of milk and the night will continue. Rinse and repeat over and over again until Billy graduates or his dad finally throws him out or kills him, whatever comes first.

Billy knows how this ends, but still he hears his stupid mouth say, “I *know*, dad, but I told you, you said we needed it for tomorrow ni-”

Billy's palms sting again when he lands back on the ground, no bookshelf to crash up against or to keep him standing. He sits back on his knees, looks up. Billy sees his dad, the tightness in his mouth, feels the hot, curling smoke of fear in the back of his own throat, feels his dad's boot when it connects with his side, feels more than hears something crack, doubles over.

He hears a jingle, the sound of his dad scooping up his dropped keys. Billy's still bent over on the ground, teeth clenched in pain. The next thing he hears is his dad's voice, suddenly far away saying, "Billy won't be joining us for dinner," and the door that slams behind him. Billy lets himself sink forward, presses his forehead into the driveway. The gravel stings, but the driveway is cold and soothing. Billy feels hot all over.

He knows when Max and Susan and his dad move to go eat in the kitchen because the driveway plunges into deeper darkness around him when someone turns off the light in the back room. That's when Billy sits up, cold and darkness creeping under his skin. Sitting here reminds him a little of Harrington on those farms, in the middle of nowhere, letting the darkness wrap around him. Only there's no peace in Billy, on his knees in this driveway. Just bitter, hard-edged anger.

Billy gets up. It hurts. Billy walks. It hurts. Billy keeps walking, because he doesn't know where his car keys are if his dad grabbed them and he doesn't have the urge or the energy to find them. They're probably inside the house now. His dad's voice and that slammed shut door tell Billy all he needs to know about the kind of welcome he'd have there.

He walks and hurts and walks and aches and eventually he makes it to a bar he's tried to get into a few times, with different degrees of success. It's out toward the edges of Hawkins, smells like the rest of the town, like shit. The people who go here are farmers, are hiding, are trying not to be seen. It's perfect for Billy. It's here that he pushes his back against the wall and slides down to sit, an arm wrapped around his aching ribs. His nose isn't bleeding, at least, although his cheek feels like it's swelling.

He locks his jaw and stares straight ahead. He's cold, but the amount

of effort it would take him to stand seems too much, so he doesn't. He's so fucking tired and he feels something hot behind his eyes when he thinks about a slammed shut door and a family eating dinner. He'd hit something, someone if getting up didn't seem so impossible.

He's just so *tired* and it's so fucking cold.

Billy closes his eyes, just for a second--

--but when he opens them again he's lying in a bed, there's white all around him and a nurse wants to know his name.

"John Doe," he says, before he's even really awake. His dad doesn't do hospitals. When she asks again Billy grits his teeth and calls her a dumb bitch as a reflex. She rolls her eyes at him and slams the door when she walks out.

Billy looks around the little exam room he's in. From what she'd said, he guesses they think he got in a fight at that bar. They don't know how old he is and they don't know who he is and that, that is gonna be what saves him from his dad ever figuring out that someone put him in a fucking hospital. Well, someone *got* him to a hospital, Billy thinks. It's his dad who fucking put him here.

He lifts his shirt to peer at his ribs. The bruising is darker than normal. He pokes at it and hisses in pain, has to shut his eyes at the hot flash of *hurt* that crackles from his ribs all over his body. He thinks of the sound his ribcage had made in the driveway and feels a little sick.

The door opens again. The nurse is back with a doctor. "I have good news," the doctor says without preamble. "We don't think there's any major internal damage, just a cracked rib or two, nothing broken but we'd like to be sure. Let's get your name so we can get you checked in."

"John Doe," Billy says.

"Now son--"

Billy fucking *hates it* when people he doesn't know call him son. He's

nobody's fucking *son*. "How fucking stupid are the doctors in this shitty hick town?" Billy asks, leaning up on his elbows and licking his lips. The movement hurts, makes him grimace. He bares his teeth. "You fucking can't hear me, or something? *John. Doe.*"

"Maybe you should think about it for a little while, son," the doctor says, uses that word again, all kind and patronizing. Billy sets his jaw and looks straight ahead and doesn't say anything. "We'll give you a few minutes and check back up on you--" the doctor pauses, "It looks like you've been through a lot, but I promise, the man who did this, he won't find you here."

Damn fucking right he won't find Billy here. His dad is never going to fucking know he was here. Billy keeps his eyes ahead, grins too big and too mean at the nurse when she clucks worriedly, sneers at the doctor when he says he'll be back shortly.

After the door shuts behind them, Billy counts sixty Mississippis in his head three times and then pulls open the door to the exam room. No one is watching him.

It's easy, after that. He's still in his clothes, his shoes. He walks--one arm curled around his ribs, his steps a little ginger--right out the front goddamn door of the clinic. He's got a few dollars on him in quarters, so he's thinking if he can just find a bus stop, or something, he can figure the rest out from there.

Billy walks two laps in front of the clinic before he finally concedes that there's no fucking bus stop here. Why would Indiana have something as convenient, as normal as a fucking *bus stop* in front of a clinic?

It's easy to feel angry all at once, about moving, about his dad, about this stupid fucking town and how goddamn alone he feels in it. In California, if he didn't have his car, there was always a way to get around, to get *away*. Indiana is wide open spaces and no public transit that's reliable and he feels stranded, trapped, cornered. It makes him feel panicked, which he masks in anger.

He paces up and down the street, glaring at people who look at him too long. The walking fucking hurts, but it still feels better than

standing still and shivering, because Indiana is a hick fucking place and *also* too cold for a jean jacket over a henley. In California, he wouldn't be so fucking cold. In California, he'd have a way home.

"Fuck," he says, and a car drives by and Billy's thinking he's going to try and fucking hitchhike, maybe, when the window rolls down and a woman says, "Honey, are you lost?"

At least she doesn't call him *son*. Billy bites his tongue on a rude reply and asks instead:

"Where's the bus?" He shoves his hands in his pockets.

"About two miles down the main road," the woman says, "Which is about half a mile from here."

"Fuck," Billy says again. "This fucking place."

"There's a payphone around the corner," the woman suggests. She's looking him up and down. "You could call a--" she pauses, looks at him again, "--friend for a ride, perhaps. Or a cab if there's one running this late."

"Right," Billy says. "Thanks."

He should have just bought the gallon of milk. Now he's cold and stupid and his ribs and his cheek *hurt* and he's in the middle of goddamn nowhere Indiana all of the time now, but he's apparently found someplace even less fucking populated than *Hawkins*. Jesus fucking *Christ*. He should have just bought the gallon of milk. He should have kept his damn mouth shut and not talked back. He should have been *responsible* and barring that he should have shown *respect* and it isn't fair. It isn't fucking fair. His dad was right. The thought hurts more than his stupid fucking ribs.

Billy feels something hot behind his eyes again and he shuts them tight. When he opens them, the woman has driven away.

There is a payphone around the corner, though, well out of the view of the clinic doors. He steps into the booth and shuts the door and leans against the glass and stares at the phone. Billy has exactly two Hawkins numbers memorized and neither of them is a cab company.

He doesn't think he has the cash on him for a cab anyway.

So he has two options, which really means one option. He can't fucking call his dad.

Billy slams his hand against the side of the payphone in frustration and then calls the only number in Hawkins he knows besides his own.

"Harrington," Billy says, "I need you to come and fucking pick me up."

Harrington had given Billy his number outside the gym that night, when they'd talked for too long and Harrington's fingers had smoothed over Billy's skin, when Harrington had talked him down of the ledge of something bad and broken. When it had finally gotten too late, when the time on Billy's watch had felt more like a warning, he'd peeled away from the wall, from the safety of the shadows and Harrington's warmth and said he had to go home. Harrington had looked at him for a long, silent second, then he'd dug around in his backpack and scrawled his number on a piece of paper and shoved it at Billy.

"In case you need it.

"This is your writing homework," Billy had said.

"It's fine. I won't pass anyway. Drive safe."

Billy hadn't just kept the number. He'd memorized it. Just in case.

For times like this, apparently.

Billy's shivering by the time Harrington pulls up to the bench he's sitting on and then Billy's standing before the BMW has even pulled to a stop. He yanks the door open and drops down into the seat, wraps a careful arm around his ribs and huddles into himself. He stares out the window. He absolutely isn't going to fucking look at Harrington.

"You all right?" Harrington asks, and Billy hates that question, so he doesn't answer it. "Billy?"

“Just drive,” Billy says, because if he talks about it he’s going to feel something hot behind his eyes again, and he’s already cried in front of Harrington once, doesn’t want a repeat performance.

Harrington drives, pulls away from the clinic, leaves the light of it behind for the apparent half mile drive to the main road. They don’t make it that far. They can’t have been driving for more than a minute before the lights from the clinic are no longer visible through the trees and Harrington pulls over to the side of the road. He doesn’t turn the car off, which Billy thinks is fucking wasteful given how expensive gas is, but it means the heat stays on, which Billy thinks is probably a lot more for him than it is for Harrington.

“Why were you at the clinic?” Harrington asks. It’s a more specific question than *are you all right* and Billy still hates it.

“It’s none of your fucking business.”

“Bullshit, it isn’t. I came and picked you up, didn’t I?” Billy doesn’t fucking need this, doesn’t need a guilt trip, doesn’t need an insinuation that he owes Harrington *anything* at all, even if maybe he does, even if this is maybe a favor. Billy doesn’t want to owe him shit. “It was your dad, wasn’t it?” Harrington presses.

Billy *really* doesn’t fucking need *that*. Just because Harrington knows something doesn’t mean he gets to--just fucking wave it around like that. Billy doesn’t need his pity or his bullshit. “I told you,” Billy says, “If you tell me you’re sorry then I’m going to hit you in the nose.”

Harrington doesn’t flinch back from the expression on Billy’s face, which is fucking annoying on top of everything else. “Billy--”

Fuck it. Billy is going to walk. He’s going to walk the two and a half miles to the bus station instead of sit here and listen to this, instead of owing Harrington something. He gets out of the car, slams the door shut, starts walking. He hears Harrington get out of the car, too, presumably to follow him.

Out here, there’s nothing but trees and silence and darkness. Billy hops over the barrier on the side of the road and walks out into the forest. He can lose Harrington here, he figures, then head back into

the road. The forest is creepy, he thinks, once he's about a hundred feet from the car and it's hard to see the road through the trees, but anything is better than that fucking conversation.

Harrington's fast, though. Billy can hear him crunching through the leaves behind him, and when he tries to walk faster his ribs protest the additional movement, his heavier breathing. He doesn't make it far before he feels Harrington's hand land on his shoulder, tugging, "Billy," he's saying, "Come on--"

"I told you to *fuck off*," Billy snarls, spinning around and using the momentum to slam Harrington against the nearest tree trunk. Billy presses his palm flat against Harrington's collarbone, his fingers not quite at his throat, but maybe suggesting they could be.

Billy expects Harrington to flinch or cower, to scramble, maybe to throw a punch. He doesn't expect the calm steeliness that settles over Harrington's face in the darkness that's broken only by the moon through the trees. He doesn't expect him to smile with his teeth.

"Billy grits his teeth, taps his fingers where they rest, does it to remind Harrington what he could do, of the darkness in him, the monster. Harrington pauses again, but he doesn't seem afraid, just resolved. "Go ahead," he says, voice quiet in the air between them. "Do it," he adds. "C'mon, Billy. Whatever you need to do."

And then in all that darkness, in the silence around them, his back against the trees, his eyes so fucking calm, Harrington tilts his head back, bares his throat to Billy and all *his* darkness, and then he just--

He just fucking *waits*.

"You don't think I'll do it?" Billy's voice goes low and quiet, a little dangerous. The fingers of the hand not pressed against Harrington's sternum curl into a fist, lifted higher than his hip, but not high enough to be any more than the vague promise of a threat. He'll admit--but only to himself--that he doesn't know what *it* is yet. "Monsters are real," he reminds Harrington, his voice still soft, but not gentle.

"Monsters are real," Harrington agrees, doesn't move or push or

shove or argue. Harrington lifts his hands, then, palms up, facing Billy with his fingers spread. "But here's the thing," Harrington continues. "I know monsters. Trust me on that. I just--I don't think you're one of them."

Billy growls, thinks for a second that he could draw a fist back and slam it into Harrington's face, fuck that pretty boy right up again, make him regret ever fucking asking nosey goddamn questions, it's just--

It's just, Harrington knows to ask those questions because Billy told him. Because not too long ago, Billy had said monsters are real and meant it, and Harrington had said, *I've got you* in an empty parking lot after basketball practice, had proved he meant it tonight when he'd dropped what he was doing to pick Billy up outside a clinic two and half miles from even a bus stop.

Billy drops his hand from Harrington's throat and shoves his hands in his pockets. "Whatever," he says. "Let's just fucking go."

And Harrington must not be afraid of anything, because he stays with his back against that tree and says, "You didn't answer my question, Billy."

Monsters are real, Billy had said. That should've been enough to answer the question. Billy hisses out a breath, slams his hand against the tree next to Harrington's head. Harrington doesn't flinch, but Billy does, the force of the hit ricochets down his arm and through his ribs. He doubles over, curls an arm around himself and tries to steady his breathing and also not breathe all at the same time. "Fuck," he groans.

He feels warm fingers at the nape of his neck, rubbing slowly, gently.

"Ok," Billy breathes out, stays bent at the waist, Harrington's fingers warm and a little rough where they smooth over Billy's skin. "I thought I could get the gallon of milk we need for tomorrow night, y'know, *tomorrow*," he laughs and winces, stands up straight, but Harrington's fingers don't leave his skin, they just move with him. "Irresponsible fucking me, right?" he adds, a little bitter. "And then I mouthed off because I can't fucking figure it out, how to *show*

respect.” He spits the last two words out and squeezes his eyes shut for a second, feels heat behind them, tries to swallow the lump in his throat down and keep all that ugly sadness and the darkness that comes with it *inside*.

When he opens his eyes again, Harrington’s standing at his side, his chest close enough to Billy’s shoulder that Billy can feel the heat from it, imagines he can hear the sound of Harrington’s heart beating in all this silence. Harrington’s fingers and palm settle warm across the back of Billy’s neck and Billy feels still, all of the sudden, doesn’t want to cry, doesn’t really even feel angry. He mostly just feels the places where Harrington is touching him. It’s freezing outside, still, and Billy’s more aware of it now that he remembers how warm it can feel where Harrington’s skin meets his.

There’s just silence and darkness around them, the sound of their breathing, the ache in his ribs. Billy thinks he knows how this ends, too, and he won’t be wrong about it.

It’s Harrington who moves first. He keeps his hand where it is, but steps in front of Billy. Billy thinks about pulling away, about saying the last few weeks were a one time thing, that he can’t do this, but he doesn’t say that, because monsters are real and what the fuck, he doesn’t *want* to pull away. He wants this to end the way he thinks it’s going to.

Harrington’s in front of him, and then he’s kissing him, licking into Billy’s mouth and holding him steady, anchoring Billy with the hand at the back of his neck. Billy feels goosebumps on his skin, feels something pull, an ache, deep in his stomach. Feels the slide of Harrington’s tongue against his own, slides greedy, cold hands into the pockets of Harrington’s jeans to tug him closer.

Harrington moans when Billy pulls him in tighter, presses them together so there’s no space between them, and Billy imagines that he can taste it. The hand at the back of Billy’s neck slides into his hair and Harrington pulls, gets a better angle and Billy feels soft and hazy at the edges, feels sparks up and down his spine.

Too soon, Harrington steps back. “You’re cold,” he says, and Billy licks his lips and nods, a little breathless, a little bit not sure that he

can use his mouth to make words yet, afraid that if he does he'll lose the way that Harrington tastes. "Let's go," Harrington whispers, and then the hand that had been at his neck drops and Harrington's fingers tangle with Billy's and he squeezes. Billy feels like his body goes weak, then, like he could fall to his knees right here in front of Harrington because he doesn't know what to do with a touch that gentle, with the smile at the corner of Harrington's mouth.

Harrington starts to walk away, and for a second Billy thinks about standing there and just watching him, but Harrington's still *holding his hand* so he's pulled along, follows Harrington back to the car.

Billy can still taste him, can smell him, can feel the echo of warmth where his fingertips and lips had met Billy's skin, can feel how soft Harrington's hand feels in his own.

But it's dark and cold and Billy's body aches, so he follows Harrington back to the car and drops back down into the seat. He misses Harrington's touch almost as soon as he loses it, but then Harrington's pulling away from the side of the road and reaching for Billy's hand again and squeezing.

"I have some bad news," Harrington says lightly.

Billy, still a little dazed and his ribs still a little achy, cuts a suspicious glance at him.

"When you called, I was on my way to dinner. So you have to come with me because I'm late and it's rude of me."

Billy is surprised to realize he knows Harrington too well to believe that's the full story. He rubs his thumb against Harrington's skin and waits him out.

"And, uh," Harrington says, "It's. With Mrs. Henderson. And Dustin, too. Uh, obviously."

Billy groans. "Is it too late for me to jump out of the car?" he asks. "I'll take my chance in the fucking woods."

Harrington makes a sound at that, seems to be taking a second to gather his thoughts, so Billy turns his head to look out the window at

those trees. It's not this forest, he doesn't think--Billy's no fucking expert in Indiana's geography--but Harrington does spend a lot of fucking time driving out into the darkness. It's how they'd really--it's how they'd started spending time together. In Harrington's silence, Billy keeps staring out the window, wondering what Harrington looks for when he drives out into those trees after sunset.

Harrington's grip on his hand tightens, but he's looking straight ahead when he says, "Much too late. I'm not letting go."

Notes for the Chapter:

I really was writing the next part of Chicago, but instead this happened. So.

3. III

Steve actively does not let go of Billy's hand the entire drive to Dustin's house. He glances over at Billy as he takes the turn and pulls up on the side of the road outside the house. Billy's been quiet for most of the drive, hasn't really said a word. His palm is warm and dry in Steve's and his fingers are still, no jitters or drumming.

Billy's looking out the window. Steve can see the movement of his eyelashes as his gaze roams over the house. Steve wonders, looking at it, what kind of story the house tells to someone who doesn't know Dustin or his mom. To him it looks just like it always does, the house he visits once a week for dinner. Sometimes more, if Mrs. Henderson has plans and needs him to watch Dustin.

But then, Steve's perception of what a house feels like is skewed from long nights spent alone in a house much bigger than he is. From sudden, whirlwind family dinners, or parties with people from work. The Henderson house, like the Byers house, is small, but warm. Comfortable. A home.

"We gonna go in or what?" Billy asks, and Steve thinks he's going for *asshole*, but there's something in his voice, an edge that sounds just this side of too forced, that shows his hand.

"You all right?"

Billy's fingers twitch in his. Steve lets go because he doesn't want to push Billy somewhere he's uncomfortable being. Billy doesn't seem to know what to do with his hand once he's got it back though. He drums his fingers restlessly on his thigh.

In the window, Steve can see Dustin's curly head appear. He's peeking through the curtains. Steve turns the car off to signal that he's getting ready to come in, but he doesn't move yet. He lets the question hang in the air between them.

"I hate that question," Billy says, which isn't an answer, but also kind of is. Steve leans back in his seat and closes his eyes for a second, pictures a hole in the ground and death calling his name.

"Me too," Steve admits. When he'd asked it, he'd meant for Billy to tell him what he's thinking. He almost tries to ask that, instead, but at the last second he opens his eyes and looks at Billy's profile, how carefully *relaxed* he is, how much he's playing it like he doesn't give two shits.

That's a mask Steve knows pretty well.

"You keep looking at me like that and I'm going to get the wrong idea," Billy says finally, but it comes out too honest to be a dig.

Steve grins at him. "Let's go in."

Billy's slow to follow Steve out of the car and up the front steps. He's dragging his feet. Steve's tried to bring a reluctant *Dustin* to follow him somewhere at greater speeds.

Steve doesn't wait to be let in, anymore, not with how often he's here. He knocks once then pushes the door open. "Mrs. Henderson?" he calls. "Sorry I'm late. I brought a friend. I hope that's all right!"

Mrs. Henderson's head pops around the corner, her smile as wide and familiar as her son's is. "I kept everything warm," she promises, coming forward to pat Steve's cheek. "Dusty loves it so much when you come for dinner," she adds, almost conspiratorially. Her eyes move beyond him to Billy. "And this must be the friend," she says.

Steve turns around in time to watch Billy's face undergo a truly ridiculous transformation. One second he's the kind of sullen, a little edgy, angry all over Billy whose hand Steve was just holding, and then next he's wearing a smile like a cat's purr. It screams pleasure. "I'm Billy," he says. "So good to meet you," and he goes to take her hand.

"Don't touch my mom!" Dustin yells, scrambling around the corner. He's got a walkie in one hand and a fork in the other.

"Dusty!" Mrs. Henderson gasps.

"*Dustin*," Steve hisses.

There is a long, awkward moment where the four of them stare at

each other. It's broken by a sound like Billy *yelping*.

This night. Steve's life. It's all fucking weird.

When Billy turns around, there's a kitten climbing determinedly up the back of his leg.

"Get him, Dart!" Dustin yells, waving the fork in the air.

Steve's jaw drops. "You named it *Dart*?" he asks, voice a little strangled.

"It was Dusty's idea! Here kitty kitty," Mrs. Henderson says. She doesn't appear the least bit alarmed as she walks across the room and deftly plucks the kitten from the back of Billy's thigh. "I'd named it after Mews, at first, but that seemed so maudlin. Dustin suggested a new name! Such a good, strong name for a good, strong kitten," she presses a kiss to the top of the kitten's fuzzy little head, and then she hands it to Billy. "He wants to get to know you, that's all," she says. "I'm Mrs. Henderson, by the way."

All the charm seems to have been sucked out of him by the kitten's claws. "Billy," Billy says a little lamely, still holding the fucking kitten.

"You already told me that, dear," Mrs. Henderson says. She pats his arm.

Steve takes advantage of her distraction to kick Dustin in the shin, hard. "You named it *Dart*?" he hisses again.

"Son of a bitch," Dustin mumbles, rubbing his shin. "And yes! I did!" he turns sad, big eyes on Steve. "R-I-P," he says, solemnly, and lays a hand over his heart.

Steve hates it. He hates his whole entire life.

Not as much, however, as he hates the--the *thing* that Mrs. Henderson scoops lovingly onto his plate. She calls it *impossible cheeseburger pie* and is thrilled to tell them that the cheeseburger makes its own crust. She certainly didn't make one, just mixed it all together and there you go! Steve wonders if he can drown himself in his glass of water.

He glances up to tell Billy that he has to eat it, that he absolutely cannot be rude about this, but when he opens his mouth, Billy's looking at Mrs. Henderson with wide eyes. "I haven't had this in years," he says.

"It's an old recipe," she admits. "From--a bisquick box, I think? I cut it out and I keep it in the drawer. Dusty loves it."

Billy's staring down at his plate now, at the impossible cheeseburger pie. "My mom used to make it," he says. "She liked the--the way the crust just forms, too."

Steve's stomach goes tight.

"You have a *mom*?" Dustin demands, still clutching his fork a little bit like a weapon. Steve thinks that if he'd shown that level of forethought about a potential enemy when the actual Dart came into the picture his mom probably wouldn't have needed a new cat.

Billy's whole face closes down, just shutters, but when Steve tries to catch his eye, Billy's staring calmly at Dustin. He bares his teeth and licks his lips. It's threatening, but it's also silent, and Steve's pretty sure that's for Mrs. Henderson's benefit. She's looking down at her plate. "I love this. Thank you, Mrs. Henderson," Billy says out loud, even as he looks across the table at Dustin and draws a finger across his throat. Steve knows Billy well enough now to know he's just fucking around. He thinks. Probably.

It is only through the grace of years of etiquette training that Steve does not actually attempt to drown himself in his glass of water.

~

The worst part of nights like these, Steve thinks as he waits for Mrs. Henderson to get Billy a tupperware of the impossible cheeseburger pie, is how easy it is for him to slip back into feeling normal. On nights like these, Mrs. Henderson smiles and Dustin acts like a kid and Billy is--feigning being civilized, or something, Steve's still figuring it out--and Steve feels light and warm, just like the inside of this house. It's easy to shake off the weight of the last few months under the glow of nights like this one.

He feels something press against his leg, and when he looks down, Dart the second meows at him in the tiniest cat voice he's ever heard. Steve glares. "If you eat *anything* alive," he says, "You should know I have a bat. It has *nails*."

"What the fuck?" Billy says from a foot away.

Steve looks up. "Nothing," he answers. He leans down and pats the top of Dart's head. "Just getting to know the new kitten."

"Are you sure you can't stay a bit longer? My shows are about to be on and I think you'll find them very funny," Mrs. Henderson is saying. She walks into the room and presses a tupperware into Billy's hands. "For you," she says. "You boys are all so skinny!"

"Thanks," Steve says, but when he glances at Billy he gets nothing but a blank stare. "But--I think we have to head home. School tomorrow."

"Well all right," Mrs. Henderson says. She envelopes Steve in a hug. "I'll see you next week for dinner, then. If not sooner," and then she pauses and walks over to Billy. "You're welcome any time," she says, patting his cheek. "It's good for Dusty to socialize."

"Not with psychopaths!" Dustin shouts from somewhere else inside the house.

"Dusty!" his mom shouts back, "Don't be *rude*!"

And then they're sitting back in Steve's car, and he's looking at all the darkness around them, and it's suddenly not so easy to forget all the things that could be hiding in the shadows. "Do you want to go home?" Steve asks when Billy doesn't say anything, but they've been sitting outside the house in silence for too long.

"No," Billy says, and his voice is rough and low. "But I have to." His knee is bouncing, a fast, scattered rhythm. Steve can hear his breathing speed up, see the white knuckled grip Billy has on the tupperware, but when he looks at Billy's face it is a wall that Steve can't see through or over.

"Right," Steve says. He pulls away from Dustin's house, leaves the

warm glow of the lights in the windows behind them as he drives out toward where Billy lives. He waits until they've got far enough away before, staring straight ahead, Steve reaches out in the darkness of the car and rests his palm on top of Billy's hand.

It's another stop sign before Billy's palm turns over and he interlocks his fingers with Steve's.

They don't talk at all, not about Dustin and his weird threats, not about Mrs. Henderson and her warm affection, not about all the different masks that Steve has seen Billy put on in the last few hours. They don't talk about the hospital, or the fact that they're kissing a lot, or the fact that they're holding hands, or the fact that Billy's got bruises on his face that his dad put there. They definitely don't talk about school tomorrow.

"Here," Billy says, suddenly, his fingers going tight around Steve's. "Stop here. And then you have to just turn around. Don't--" he stops. "Don't drive in front of the house."

Steve pulls over, nods, but even after the car's come to a stop he doesn't let go of Billy's hand. "I'll see you tomorrow," Steve says eventually, firm. "Early." Billy's looking at him like he doesn't quite believe Steve's real, so Steve leans over, across the space between them and brushes his lips against Billy's, just for a heartbeat. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says again.

"Yeah," Billy says. He lets go of Steve's hand, then, opens the door and climbs out of the car. At the last second, he thrusts the tupperware filled with the impossible cheeseburger pie back through the door. Steve grabs it automatically. "You take it," Billy says, his voice tight all of the sudden. "I can't bring that home."

Steve sets it on the seat and watches Billy walk down the road and turn toward his driveway, his hands shoved in his pockets. He remembers how good it had felt when Billy had done this, had watched him go home safe, and he stays there for a long time, until the house Billy walked into looks quiet, until everything seems calm.

In the stillness of a school night, Hawkins already all tucked into bed, Steve makes a U-turn in Billy's neighborhood and heads back toward

the center of town. Only he misses the first turn that he could make and the second one, too.

The shadows are growing. Steve thinks that it's probably only a matter of time before something crawls out of them. He doesn't plan to be caught off guard. He drives past the turn that would bring him back into town, drives out to the edges of Hawkins where the world seems to taper off into silence and trees. He leaves the bat in the car and walks out into the trees, darkness all around him, and he waits.

And he thinks about Billy and the impossible pie sitting in his passenger's seat. He thinks about the way that Billy tastes, about the desperation Steve can see hanging at the corners of his eyes, in the pull of his mouth. He thinks about Billy's fingers at his throat, the palm that had slammed into the tree beside his head, of Billy's low, dangerous voice.

Steve wishes he knew how to tell Billy that he's not afraid of darkness, not the kind in these trees and not the kind inside of Billy, either. Steve wishes he knew how to tell him that he's stared into the toothy, flower-faced mouth of darkness and still he comes out here alone, at night, looking for more.

Monsters are real and Steve is too afraid all the time to be afraid of anything in particular, least of all Billy.

He wishes, too, that he knew how to tell Billy about the darkness inside of *him*, the darkness that maybe they should all be afraid of, soothed only by this--these late night field trips out to the edge of the world to wait. And wait. And wait.

Around him, the forest hisses and hums, a breeze sends leaves skittering across half frozen grass. Nothing comes out of the shadows. Eventually, tired, Steve goes home.

His horrified mother, home for half a second between spa trips, finds the impossible cheeseburger pie in the fridge at 2:15 in the morning and throws it out. He hears her do it from where he's not sleeping, lying curled on his side, staring at the soft glow of the pool in his window.

~

The next morning, when Steve pulls up to school--thirty minutes early--the Camaro is already there. It's still a bit fucked up from that time Max drove it. Steve wonders if there's a way he could pay to have it fixed without anyone figuring out it was him.

Steve doesn't park next to Billy. He parks where he always does, right near the front of the school, quick and easy in and out. He parks in the spot he still hasn't lost even though he's not King Steve anymore. He grabs his backpack and gets out of the car. He slams the door loud enough that Billy should be able to hear it.

He does. Steve watches him get out of his car--no backpack, cigarette between his lips--and then start walking across the parking lot.

"Where's my fucking cheeseburger pie?" Billy calls once he's about halfway there.

"My mom threw it out," Steve says. "Sorry."

"You have a mom?" Billy asks, a perfect imitation of Dustin from the night before.

Steve laughs. "Sometimes," he says. "You're here early."

Billy shrugs, kicks at a rock in the parking lot with his toe as he pulls even with Steve, doesn't look at him. "You said early."

Billy keeps walking toward school so Steve falls into step beside him. "How was last night?"

Steve watches Billy take a drag from the cigarette, pull it away from his mouth to exhale smoke at Steve's face. "Peachy fucking keen," Billy says.

Steve wonders if every conversation with Billy is going to feel so much like pulling teeth.

They're at the front door. "You can't smoke in school," Steve says.

Billy grins at him, wide and full of teeth. He takes another drag, tips

his head back and exhales smoke at the sky. Then he walks through the front door, into the middle of the lobby, glances back at Steve and drops the cigarette. He grinds it into the tile with the heel of his boot and then wanders off down the hall. "Mr. Hargrove!" yells a teacher who must have seen. She scurries after him. Billy doesn't stop, just keeps walking until Steve can't see him or the teacher anymore, until he can only hear the echoes of "Mr. Hargrove! Mr. Hargrove!" and only smell the fading scent of cigarette smoke.

~

"We need to talk," Dustin says, dropping down in the seat across from Steve in the diner.

"Oh...kay," Steve says, taking a sip of his coke. He watches Dustin grab for a menu. "I already got you the mac and cheese and a milkshake," Steve says.

Dustin grins at him, purrs through his teeth. "You're the coolest," he says. The smile falls and Dustin sits with his back straight, hands clasped on the table in front of him. "Which is why I am so concerned."

Steve blinks. Sips his coke. He wonders if Dustin's found out about his trips out to the farms, his sort of late-night patrols. Shit. "There's nothing to be worried about," Steve says, keeps his voice calm.

"Of course there is!" Dustin loses any semblance of seriousness as he waves his hands around. "You brought *Billy Hargrove* to my house!" Steve is so relieved. He almost chokes on his coke from laughing. "This isn't funny, Steve!" Dustin snaps. "This is very fucking serious. He's the enemy!"

"You're being dramatic," Steve says.

"He tried to kill us! Twice! And you at least once. And it was almost successful!"

"That was--" not a mistake, not either time. "That was a tough night for everyone, Dustin. Including us."

“Yeah, except we were *saving the world* and he was *trying to kill us*.”

Steve doesn't know how to tell an eighth grader that shit is more complicated than that, but he needs to tell him something, because Dustin is staring at him intently from under the brim of his hat, corners of his mouth pulled down into a frown. “Listen, you guys want to keep hanging out with Max, right?”

“Duh,” says Dustin. “She's *awesome*.”

“You need Billy on board for that. This is how we get Billy on board.”

Dustin tilts his head to the side, considering. “So you're like--a double agent?”

“Exactly,” Steve says. “Keep Billy calm, keep him on board. You guys get to keep hanging out with Max. Easy.”

Dustin seems to be thinking this over. “I'll take it to the rest of the Party,” he says finally. “I'll let you know what we decide.”

Steve has to hide his smile by sipping his drink. “Sounds good, buddy,” Steve says. The waitress appears, sets the milkshake down in front of Dustin. Dustin's distracted by it enough that he doesn't seem to notice when Steve changes the subject. “So,” he says. “Tell me about your science project.”

“It's about different types of pollywogs,” Dustin says. “You know, because of Dart.” He pauses. “The first Dart. Not my mom's cat.”

“Right,” Steve says, nodding.

“Anyway, I figure the more we know the more prepared we are if anything ever--”

Dustin stops, then. Steve watches it happen, the switch from kid to kid-who's-seen-some shit, the way his mouth tugs down at the corners again, the way he kind of glances away. Steve gives him a second, then he kicks him under the table. “Tell me about the research,” he insists, even though he doesn't care.

Dustin beams at him. “Ok,” he says. “So it's like this...”

Eventually, their food comes and Dustin doesn't shut up about his project, or the new game at the arcade, or the book that he and Will are trying to read at the same time. Steve listens to him talk.

After a while, Steve looks out the window. It's dark outside. Dustin's on his third milkshake and Steve's had enough cokes to stay awake for the next month. "All right, buddy," Steve says. He leaves cash on the table. "Let me get you home."

Dustin sighs dramatically, but nods, and they both head out to Steve's car. They're almost all the way back to Dustin's house when he sees it, the Camaro pulled over on the side of the road, the driver's side door open.

Steve frowns, pulls up behind it. "Steve?" Dustin asks, frowning too, leaning forward in his seat.

"Stay in the car," Steve says, something prickling up his spine. "Stay in the car and lock the doors."

Steve grabs a flashlight and gets out, shuts the door behind him, shines the light in Dustin's face through the windshield until he hears the doors lock. Then he walks, quiet, careful, around the Camaro. When he shines it in the window, there's blood on the steering wheel. On the seat.

"Fuck," Steve whispers. He wonders if he should go back to the car and get the fucking bat.

He looks over his shoulder at Dustin, who sits with his nose pressed against the window, his eyes wide. If he goes back to the car to get the bat, he's going to have to tell Dustin why. The forest around him is quiet, he doesn't hear anything at all, just the wind, leaves skittering across frozen grass. Steve waves at Dustin, tries for reassuring, and then steps around the Camaro, walks slowly down the hill and into the trees.

"Billy?" he calls, a few steps in. "Billy?"

Nothing. Silence. Then: "S'that you, Harrington?"

Steve heaves a sigh of relief. He turns toward the sound. He has to

walk around a few trees to find him. When he does, Billy is slumped with his back against a tree, sitting on the dirty, cold ground. There is a lot of fucking blood coming out of his nose, staining the shirt he's wearing, a bruise on his cheek. It doesn't look like anything has tried to eat him, though. Steve looks away from Billy for a second to glance at the forest around them, thinking about all the things in the woods at night that can smell blood.

"Harrington?" Billy says, squinting. Steve realizes he hasn't said anything, that Billy probably can't see him with the flashlight shining in his face like that.

"Yeah," Steve says. "What the fuck are you doing, Billy?"

"I thought," Billy says, and he sounds like his nose is stuffed up, which given the blood makes a lot of sense, honestly, "I thought I was gonna--gonna puke and I didn't want to in the car."

"So you thought you'd take your chances out here in the woods?" Steve asks. He's so relieved he could laugh. "And what, you got comfy, just stayed out here? Where'd you puke?"

"I didn't puke," Billy says, a little defensive. "I just also am very *comfortable* on the ground, all right, so fuck off."

It takes Steve a second to figure out the word *comfortable*. Billy's speech pretty hard to understand with his nose fucked up. "So you can't get up, then," Steve says. He walks over to Billy, drops down next to him on his knees. The dirt is frozen and hard and unyielding. Steve rests a hand on Billy's shoulder. "The fuck happened to you?"

"Monsters are real, right?" Billy asks him, laughing, sounding on the edge of something ugly. Steve wants to tell him not to say shit like that, not out here in these woods, not covered in blood, but it would be tough to explain why.

There's the sound of footsteps, a scrambling, scuttling sound. Billy and Steve both flinch, and Steve whips the flashlight around.

It's Dustin.

"I told you to stay in the car," Steve says, sitting back on his heels

and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What the fuck?” Dustin says. “What the fuck happened to him?”

“Monsters are re--” Billy starts to repeat.

Steve claps a hand over his mouth. Billy actually groans in pain. “Shit,” Steve says, “Sorry.”

“YOU TOLD HIM?” Dustin screams. “You said you were a *double agent*! You said you were only hanging out with him so *Max--*”

“Dustin,” Steve says, voice sharp. “I also said to stay in the fucking car.”

“Get the fuck off me, Harrington,” Billy says, shrugging out from under the hand Steve’s dropped on his shoulder. “And get your little fucking asshole friend home. I’m fine.”

Steve shines the flashlight back in Billy’s direction. His nose is still bleeding, he’s still slumped against the tree. There is a lot fucking happening right now. Dustin’s standing with his arms crossed, his face tense and angry. “I didn’t tell him,” Steve says, figuring of the two people apparently mad at him right now, Dustin’s the most able to bolt. “I didn’t,” he insists when Dustin starts to protest. “Does he fucking looks like he knows? Would you go out into the woods alone and bloody, Dustin?”

“No,” Dustin says. “I would never go out in the woods alone at night again.”

“Right. So I didn’t tell him, okay? He’s talking about something else.”

Dustin nods.

“And you,” Steve says, looking at Billy. “You’re an asshole. You try explaining to an eighth grader why we’re spending time together all of the sudden. You want to tell him what we’re really doing?”

Billy makes a face.

“You lied to me?” Dustin asks.

Shit. “No,” Steve says quickly. “No. I just--it was half the truth, okay? You want to hang out with Max you *do* need Billy on board and I’m--I’m helping with that.”

Dustin frowns. Steve wants to beat his head against the nearest tree, but he doesn’t.

“So are all three of us on the same page, now?” Steve asks. “Because I think we should get out of the fucking woods and into a car.”

“Yeah,” Dustin says.

Billy doesn’t say anything at all, which is good enough for Steve. “Dustin, take the flashlight,” he says, standing up. “Billy, I’m gonna help you get up now.”

Billy doesn’t protest the help, which is how Steve knows that he really needs it.

“Why does his face look like that?” Dustin asks. “Who did you beat up, asshole?”

“No one,” Billy grunts as Steve gets him to his feet. Steve wraps an arm around Billy’s waist, Billy throws his arm around Steve’s shoulder. “I didn’t beat anyone up.”

“Well then why the fuck do you look like--”

“Dustin,” Steve says, voice sharp again. “Shut up lead the way.”

They follow the light of the flashlight out to the road again. Then it’s just them and the two cars and the kid looking up at them both, shining the flashlight from one to the other. “Can you drive?” Steve asks Billy, ignoring Dustin for a second.

Billy grits his teeth. “Stop fucking mothering me, Harrington. I can drive.”

“Great,” Steve says. “You’re going to follow me to my house.”

“I thought your mom--”

"Left this morning," Steve says, casual, like it doesn't bother him she'd come home long enough to throw out leftovers he might have wanted to eat, but not long enough to see him.

"Don't you have to take him--"

"We'll call his mom from my house. Why, you want to go home that bad?"

Billy doesn't say anything to that. Steve helps him get to the Camaro, gets him in. "I drive slower than you," Steve warns. Dustin's standing somewhere behind him, probably doesn't see it when Steve presses his palm to Billy's cheek and runs his thumb along his jaw. Probably doesn't see the way Billy closes his eyes at the touch, the way Steve feels a little dizzy just looking at him. It's only for half a second, anyway, before Billy's eyes shoot open and he says, "Get the fuck off me, Harrington. Jesus," and Steve has to jump back to avoid being slammed shut in the door.

He walks back to his own car and climbs in. Dustin's shining the flashlight on his face again. "What the fuck is going on, Steve?" Dustin asks. Steve wishes he knew the answer to that question. "Why does his face look like that?"

Friends don't lie, Steve's brain reminds him. "It's none of your business," he says, which isn't a lie.

"What the fuck--"

"No, seriously, listen a second," Steve says. Dustin shuts his mouth. "People have their own shit, Dustin, outside of--outside of our--" Steve thinks of monsters with faces like flowers, of the acrid taste of air in that tunnel. "Outside of our shit, okay?"

"Sure, but that doesn't explain--"

Billy honks. Steve rolls his eyes and puts the car in drive, pulls around him. Billy flips them off as they drive by, but then he follows. Steve drives slowly enough that he can keep one eye on Billy in the rearview mirror, just in case he actually can't drive.

"Buddy," Steve says, "You have to trust me here. All right? He didn't

hurt anyone and it's none of your business what happened to his face."

"Fine," Dustin says. He sighs heavily. Every thirty seconds. The entire drive to the house.

When they get there, Billy pulls into the driveway right behind them. Steve gets out of the car, is walking back to help Billy when Billy gets out himself. He seems to have his feet under him a bit more, makes it over to Steve and Dustin without falling on his ass. Together, the three of them walk into the house. Steve locks the door behind them.

"Go watch tv," he says to Dustin. Dustin opens his mouth, looks ready to protest. "Anything you want. Call your mom first. Tell her I can bring you home late or have you sleep here, whatever she wants. Tell her something came up and I'm really sorry and I'll call her in thirty minutes if she wants."

Dustin eyes them both for a second before nodding. "Ugh, *fine*," he says, like he isn't delighted by the prospect of a school night sleepover. He wanders off toward the kitchen. Steve guides Billy toward the upstairs bathroom.

"Nice place you got here," Billy says, and he still sounds stupid and a little stuffy, but his nose isn't actively bleeding anymore.

"Thanks," Steve says, because he never knows what to say to people when they say that to him. The house is nice. It's comfortable. It's big and empty nearly all of the time. Just him, rattling around inside it.

He turns on the bathroom light and nudges Billy inside. Billy hops up to sit on the counter without Steve having to ask. Steve goes into the closet to find a washcloth. A few washcloths. Ones his mom won't miss when he has to throw them out because they're bloodstained.

"You told him," Billy says when Steve's got his back turned. "He knows."

Steve grabs a stack of washcloths and turns back around. Billy's looking at him without really looking at him, like he's seeing straight through Steve to the still open closet behind him. "No," Steve says,

looking at Billy. "I didn't."

"Don't fucking lie, Harrington," Billy bites off, harsh. "I saw him with the flashlight. I know he had questions. What the fuck else did the two of you talk about the whole drive here?"

Steve sighs and walks to the sink. He's standing right next to Billy, running his fingers under the water to check the temperature. "I didn't tell him, Billy," Steve says. "You don't have to believe me, but friends don't lie."

"Friends?" Billy says.

Steve shrugs. "What the fuck else would you call it when I'm picking you up from hospitals and the side of the road? When you--" he hesitates for a second, "When you drive out to farms in the middle of the fucking night so I'm not sitting alone in the dark."

"I don't think it makes it less weird that I'm there," Billy says. "Just so you know."

"At least we're weird together," Steve says, sticking the washcloth under the faucet and then moving to stand between Billy's legs.

"Yeah," Billy says.

Steve hooks his fingers under Billy's chin, cleans his face carefully, softly. "I don't think it's broken," he says after a few long moments of silence. "Your nose, I mean. It's swollen, but I've seen broken noses before and yours looks all right."

"That's a relief," Billy says. "My face is my best feature."

Steve grins, "Not your very best," he says.

Something in Billy's face goes tight, goes hard, then relaxes. "Thanks," he says, softly. Billy clears his throat. "For uh, pulling over tonight. Or whatever. You could have kept driving."

"No I couldn't've," Steve says, looking up at him. Billy looks so fucking tired. Steve gets a last bit of blood off of Billy's cheek, sets the stack of bloody washcloths he's gone through in the sink to be

dealt with tomorrow. He lifts his hand and cups Billy's cheek again, guides Billy down until their lips brush together, until Steve can lick past Billy's teeth with a hand in his hair.

Steve is never going to get used to the way that Billy goes soft for him, like this, the way he goes pliant and easy against Steve's mouth.

There's the sound of footsteps on the stairs. "Steve!" Dustin's voice breaks the moment, loud and worried. Steve steps back out of Billy's space, grabs the washcloths and throws them out. When Dustin's head pokes around the doorframe--fuck, Steve definitely should have closed the door--Billy's leaning against the counter, poking his face in the mirror. "I wanted to make sure he didn't kill you," Dustin says, looking back and forth between them suspiciously.

Steve spins in a circle. "Totally alive," he says.

Billy doesn't look away from where he's prodding the swollen edges of his nose when he says, "My dad."

Steve goes very, very still.

"What?" Dustin says.

"My dad," Billy repeats, motioning at his face.

"Oh," Dustin says. He turns and walks away, then. Steve hears him half scramble down the stairs.

"Billy," Steve hisses. "He's just a fucking kid--you can't--" he stops, then, because what a stupid fuckng sentence. Dustin's just a fucking kid, but so are they, and Billy's poking his near-broken nose in Steve's bathroom mirror.

Billy shrugs.

"I'll be back in a second," Steve says. He walks out of the room and follows Dustin down the stairs. Dustin is sitting on the couch, staring at the tv. It's a scary movie. Steve probably shouldn't have told him he could watch anything he wants.

Steve sits down next to him and leans back. He pokes Dustin in the

shoulder until Dustin turns to look at him. "It's not fair," is what Dustin says, which Steve isn't expecting.

"What?"

"It's not fair," Dustin repeats. "What happens to people. It's not *fair*." He doesn't quite cry, then, but he does let Steve hug him, which he doesn't normally do. After a little while, Dustin pulls back and sniffs. "I think I want to go home," he says.

Steve calls Dustin's mom to tell her they're coming. He goes upstairs to tell Billy they're leaving, leaves Billy sitting on the couch while he takes Dustin home. He walks him up to the door, hugs him again, says, "You really can't tell anyone all that, okay? But you can call me. Whenever. If you need to talk."

Dustin nods and goes inside. For a few minutes, Steve stays standing on the porch in the darkness, looking at Dustin's little house and thinking about what it must be like to feel like you can go home to feel safe again when your world has been rocked.

Steve gets back to his car, he drives to his big empty house. He's a little surprised when he finds the Camaro still in the driveway.

Billy isn't on the couch. He isn't out back, or in the kitchen, or in any of the bathrooms. Steve finally finds him in his bedroom, in a pair of Steve's basketball shorts. Steve thinks he might be asleep, but then Billy says, "Only your room could be so fucking ugly, Harrington. I knew it was yours as soon as I found it."

"Shut up," Steve says, stripping down to his briefs and crawling into bed behind Billy. They've never--done this. This feels really fucking intimate. For a second, Steve wonders if he made a mistake, but then Billy scoots back in bed until Steve is curled around him, Billy's back to his chest. Steve throws his arm over Billy, their fingers tangle together over Billy's stomach.

"How's the kid?" Billy asks.

"Fine," Steve says. "He's not--you're not the first person he knows who's been through--who has--" Steve doesn't really know how to say

it, "--uh, that. I think it just surprised him. He's been through a lot. They all have."

"Right," Billy says, voice soft. "You asked him if he'd go out in the woods alone," Billy says. "He said he wouldn't. Because of whatever you guys have been through," Billy pauses. "You made it sound like you wouldn't when you asked him that, Harrington. But you go out into the woods alone all the time."

"Go to sleep, Billy," Steve says, because he doesn't know how to answer the question Billy hasn't quite asked yet. He doesn't know *why*.

Steve feels Billy's breathing even out, eventually, feels Billy go loose and pliant as he sleeps. Steve presses his lips against Billy's bare shoulder and shuts his eyes.

It's a long fucking time before he falls asleep.

When he wakes up in the morning, Billy's gone.

Notes for the Chapter:

Impossible cheeseburger pie is a real thing from a Bisquick box and you can find the recipe [right here!](#). It's definitely gross, though.

4. IV

The shadows are long on the wall when Billy blinks awake, his room cast in the blue light of just after sunrise. For a second, he doesn't remember how he got there, back into his own bed in his tiny bare room. For a second, Harrington's breath ghosts against the back of Billy's neck and Billy feels warm from it, but then his eyes focus on the room around him and Billy feels cold and scared and empty in the way he always feels cold and scared and empty in this house.

His knee aches. Billy pushes back the covers enough to frown down at the scabbed skin. He'd scraped it climbing in through the window that morning, after he'd slipped out of Harrington's bed and driven through a still dark, still sleeping Hawkins. The blood had dried. Billy hopes there's none on his sheets. Hopes there's none on the windowsill.

He sits up slowly, running a hand through his hair. In this light, his room looks especially stark, just a poster and some stacks of crates, the clutter of his cologne and hair products don't do much to add to the personality of the space. Harrington's room had been hideous, but lived in, too. A room that has been built over the years around the person inside of it. A room in a house that's cared about.

Billy thinks of the tearing in the hallway carpet that he trips over every morning. Even their house in California had been better than this, and Billy's friends used to say it was a real shitthole when they snuck over, when Neil was out and Billy was stupid and brave and feeling full and warm from his mom's cooking.

All that was before shit got bad, before Susan and Max, but not before Billy had been a disappointment. Before his dad had figured him out, had named it there in the kitchen in California. Billy hangs his head between his shoulders and fists his hands around his blankets and knows that he left Steve Harrington's bed this morning because he's a coward.

Because Dustin knows about his dad. Because Dustin knows Max. Because that's a death sentence and Billy's not sure how literally he means that, yet, but it spells the end of whatever he's been doing at

the edge of the world with Harrington.

Billy hates how fucking attached he becomes to safe spaces. It always makes it hard to sever that tie. It's only a matter of time, though, he knows. It won't take Neil to ruin it. Billy can feel the soft threads of worry gnawing at his stomach. Because Dustin knows and he'll say something and Billy will ruin everything before it can be ruined by someone else.

That, Billy knows, is how this is going to go. Still, he closes his eyes and remembers how it had felt to have Harrington curled up around him. He savors that until he hears the sound of his father getting up for work, the thump of his steps in the house. Billy has to hustle if he wants to shower, and he does, because a quick glance in his mirror confirms how fucking bad his hair looks.

Billy showers. His face looks worse in the light of the bathroom here than it had at Harrington's. It's probably got something to do with the quality of the lightbulbs, with the dingy quality of the beat up old tiles. Billy runs his fingers along the counter and thinks of smooth, fashionable marble, thinks of Harrington's smile, the brightest thing in all that white in the second floor bathroom.

Billy thinks of Dustin, of the way he'd looked back and forth between them, run out of the room. Billy had been willing to believe, last night, that he was just an upset kid. For Harrington's sake, maybe, or maybe even for his own, so that he could say it was all right to go upstairs and curl up in Harrington's bed to wait for him to come home. Like Billy had any right to be there.

Billy stares at himself in the mirror and pokes the cut above his eyebrow and hisses at the pain. He wraps a towel around his waist and walks quickly down the hall, back to his bedroom where he can put a door between him and the rest of the house. He pulls on his jeans, his shirt, his leather jacket, and then he pulls himself together, tries to cast aside the jitters burning hot under his skin, the old embers of habit. He has something good to lose, he thinks. It's all just a matter of time.

Billy's scared.

He fucking hates it.

He'd felt *want* running deep in the marrow of his bones when he'd woken up in Harrington's bed this morning and that isn't fucking fair. Billy barely remembers what it feels like to want something anymore, but his body remembers, the thread that starts in his heart and burrows through the rest of him remembers.

It's the warmth he resents, especially in this room and this house where everything is always cold. It's the kind of warmth that comes from a washcloth in soft hands, soothing over bruised and bloody skin in the bright white of a fancy bathroom. The kind that comes from fingers tangled together in the car on the way back from dinner. The kind of warmth that spells out good, that Billy's no good at keeping.

Especially, he thinks, staring at his reflection, when he'd beat the source of that warmth half to death barely long enough ago for the bruises to fade.

His eyebrow throbs. Billy grabs his school shit and walks out to the kitchen to wait for Max. She takes for fucking *ever*. Long enough that Billy's dad walks through to leave, looks surprised to see him there, then irritated. Billy sips his mug of coffee and tries not to do anything to get himself in trouble. He hopes, suddenly, that he wasn't too loud sneaking back in last night.

His dad's gaze lingers on him for a long minute, but then he leaves. Billy exhales at the sound of his truck pulling away, does his best not to fall face first against the table. When Max finally appears, Billy's jitters have settled in the absence of any real threat, but he's annoyed he had to wait.

"Took you fucking long enough," Billy says when she walks in.

Max barely pauses in the doorway long enough to look at him. Her eyes flick over the bruising on his face and her mouth pinches in a frown. She grabs her backpack and sticks her middle finger up at the same time, storming out the front door.

He trails after her, those early embers of panic stoked back to life by

her silence, her anger. “What crawled up your ass and died?” he asks over the roof of the Camaro, finally unlocking it and dropping inside.

She climbs in, too, holds her backpack tight to her chest and looks out the window. Her jaw is tight, her eyes narrowed. Billy’s seen Max angry enough to know what it looks like. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “The silent treatment, huh?” he asks, pulling away from the house. “What’d I do to get so fucking lucky, Maxine?”

She doesn’t rise to the bait, but he watches her jaw tick in irritation out of the corner of her eye. She clutches her backpack to her chest. When he finally pulls up outside the school, she’s out of the car before he’s even stopped it.

“Max!” he shouts. “Be fucking careful!”

She throws her middle finger up in his face again, but whips around. “You be fucking careful!” she says. “I told you to leave my friends alone!”

Billy’s whole body goes cold, then hot. He feels the flush start in his cheeks, prickle down his neck and chest, to his fingertips and cold. Panic. Fear. She whirls on her heel and stomps away before he can ask her what she’s talking about.

Billy tries to draw in a few deep breaths, but he has to struggle through it. He can’t really think around the panic chewing a hole in his brain, not when he can’t be sure what Max knows, what Max means.

He hears music, another car pulling up. It’s early for the middle school and he recognized the sound, he still turns his head to confirm it’s the BMW. A second later, Dustin’s climbing out of it, waving a cheerful goodbye and walking across the parking lot to catch up with Max.

He knows. She knows. Billy’s fucked.

He’s out of the car, running across the parking lot, before he really makes the decision to find out more. If they know--if they all know--Billy needs to *know what they know*.

“Hey!” he snarls, grabbing Dustin by the shoulder and spinning him around. Dustin stumbles a little with the force of it.

“What the fuck?” Dustin says, eyes wide, hat askew. He adjusts his backpack and eyes Billy’s hand on his shoulder.

“What did you say to her?” Billy growls, leaning in close to Dustin’s face. “What did you tell her?”

Little kids and their fucking gossip. What do they know about secrets? The kind that could fucking ruin shit?

“I didn’t say *anything*,” Dustin says. He pushes at Billy’s wrist. “Calm down, man. Christ.”

Billy heart is stuttering in his chest. He feels his bones rattling around under his skin. He shakes Dustin a bit. “What did you--”

“Nothing, Billy. I already said that!” Dustin says.

He’s not even afraid. Billy can see it on his face. He’s nervous, sure, but he’s not afraid of Billy, and Billy thinks that Dustin should be. Thinks that he’s got all this desperation burning hot under his skin. “Listen,” Dustin starts..

Billy can’t listen. He can’t listen because he’s fucking doomed because they’re all gonna know. They’re going to tell everyone. Panic flashes again through Billy, chased by humiliation. He needs to know how bad this is. “What did you tell her?”

“Billy!” Max shouts. “What the fuck!” and when he looks up she running back toward them.

“I just need to know what you told her,” Billy says, shaking Dustin again.

Billy feels a hand land on his shoulder. He stumbles with the force of the shove that comes next, his hand dropping off Dustin. Harrington’s face is set and angry. He steps neatly between Billy and Dustin. Max appears then, her cheeks red as her hair, she grabs Dustin’s hand and pulls him back.

Dustin still doesn't look afraid. He looks worried. Billy bares his teeth. "I'm going to fucking--" *find out what you did*, he's going to say, but Harrington shoves him again and Billy stumbles backwards, surprised.

"Get your fucking hands away from that kid," Harrington says. His hands are curled into fists at his sides and his eyes are narrowed. The expression on his face is startling in its raw anger. Billy almost takes a step back.

That's at him, the anger. Harrington thinks he's going to hurt that kid. Billy supposes he deserves that.

I'm out here looking for monsters, Harrington had said to him, once. *I might be one*, Billy had warned him. *I don't think you are*, Harrington had whispered, soft and to the air between them.

Harrington's a fucking liar.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Hargrove?"

A few hours ago, Harrington had whispered *Billy* into his ear, sweet with sleep, their fingers tangled over Billy's stomach.

Hargrove.

"We're just having a little conversation, Harrington," Billy says. Harrington's a fucking liar and Billy can lean into that for now. Humiliation and panic are a powerful cocktail burning away under Billy's skin like this. He smirks, pulls out a cigarette and lights it, lets it hang between his lips as he sneers, "Didn't realize I'd upset the babysitter."

"Billy!" Max says, her eyes wide. "What the fuck."

"God, do you ever *shut up*?" Billy snaps at her.

"Max," Harrington says. "Dustin. Go to school. Now."

He really is their fucking babysitter. They scurry away.

Billy wants to tell Harrington that the slimy little fucking kid is a

snitch. Harrington's eyes are hard, though. Unyielding. Last night he had picked Billy up from where he'd been breaking apart in the woods and his eyes had been soft.

"You don't touch him," Harrington says, his voice so low Billy takes a step forward to hear him better.

"Harrington--"

"No," Harrington says, holding a hand up. "You do not. Touch. Him."

That darkness that Billy can sometimes see, way out there in the woods, hangs heavy on Harrington's face. Billy grins at him, blows smoke in his face. "You going to stop me?" he asks. "If I try it again?"

Harrington laughs, but not like he's heard something funny. "Oh my god," he says. "Oh my god, what was I even thinking?" He looks amused, maybe. Rueful. Like he's just figured out the sad end to a sort of funny joke.

It's not the reaction Billy was expecting.

"C'mon, Harrington," Billy says, a little taunting because he doesn't remember how to be anything else. "What're you gonna do about it?"

"Yeah, no." Harrington says, quiet. "Jesus. What was I thinking? Have a nice life or whatever, Billy," he says. "Hope shit works out for you."

Harrington turns to walk away, then. Billy opens his mouth. He's not totally clear on what the fuck is going on right now, or why Harrington is walking away. Billy had *done his hair* for him. Had woken up with the ghost of his breath on the back of his neck. "What--"

Harrington looks at him over his shoulder. "I'm not fucking kidding," he says. "You touch him again and I'll make what you did to me look like a scraped knee."

And then he walks away. Dustin and Max are gone. Billy's left standing in the parking lot holding his cigarette alone and looking like an asshole. He doesn't understand what the fuck just happened.

They can talk about it later, he figures. No big deal.

~

Once the sun sets, once his dad is settled in front of the tv with a beer and Susan is doing something in the bedroom and Max is at the arcade, Billy slips slowly and carefully out his bedroom window and peels away from the house before his dad can find something helpful for him to do.

He keeps the music down low as he drives through Hawkins. His car draws enough attention and Billy's going for invisible tonight. It shouldn't be hard. Harrington hadn't so much as looked at him during school that day. Maybe Billy is fucking invisible.

Either way, Billy is driving around Hawkins with his music down low and he isn't looking for Harrington.

He's not looking for Harrington as he bangs his palm against the steering wheel and sweeps his gaze over parking lots and driveways, as he makes careful, calculated passes that start in the center of town.

He's not looking for Harrington when he drives past the diner, where he sees Tommy's car and a few other kids from school, but doesn't stop. He's not looking for Harrington when he drives past the library, sees Jonathan's car there, but it's alone. He's not looking for Harrington when he drives past the police station, when he misses the turn back to his own house, when he misses the U-turn to head back to town. He's not looking for Harrington once he's pushed himself out to the edges of Hawkins, where it's all forest and trees.

Out here, it seems impossible that the Earth continues, like Hawkins is where everything just--stops. Billy knows that isn't true, remembers waves and sand and sun, but as he drives down these lonely Hawkins roads, not even a few kids on bikes for company, he can't shake the feeling that might come at the end of the world, once everything else around him died. It's fucking lonely this far out from town, on these small winding roads that begin and end in darkness.

Billy had barely seen Harrington that day. Enough for him to get the cold shoulder, but not enough for him to needle and press and push

until Harrington took the bait. He doesn't know how Harrington had managed it. Hawkins high isn't that big. There couldn't be that many places to hide.

Harrington can't hide from this, though. Not that Billy is looking for him. Not that Billy's checked three farms with his headlights off and his engine growling low as he can get it. He's not looking for Harrington.

Maybe he just likes farms. Maybe he likes the wilderness, these endless stretches of sprawling darkness with the bare trees clawing at the sky. Maybe he fucking likes the shadows.

He keeps driving.

The last farm on this side of town is the one that pushes farthest out to the edges of the Hawkins line. Billy has to drive down a gravelly, twisting road edged with darkness and trees to even get to the turn up the farm's driveway. Finally, he can see the farmer's house from where he pulls up at the side of the road. "Shit," he says, under his breath. The Camaro's too loud to risk trying to slip by when the house is that close to the driveway.

Billy's not looking to get arrested. He leans forward in his seat, rests his forehead against the steering wheel, knows he's going to get out of the car and walk up that driveway, past that house, out into the fields and toward the forest. Wishes he weren't going to do that.

Billy sighs, checks his pockets for his keys, gets out of the car.

If someone had told Billy a few months ago that he'd be trudging through frozen grass and mud on the side of the road, trespassing on some weird ass farm in Hawkins, Indiana, he would have broken their nose.

But here he is.

Looking for Harrington.

The house is further back from the road than Billy had thought it was. He spares a few minutes to regret not trying to get closer in his car as he walks, feet crunching over half frozen grass, leaves

scuttling, some sort of insect or animal calling out from the trees. It's fucking creepy out here in all this wilderness. Billy misses the life that comes with California, the people, the music. Hawkins is mostly silence and trees and cow shit, or what the fuck ever.

Ten minutes into the walk and Billy could turn around, but he wants to see Harrington like he'd want to scratch an itch, can't shake the feeling that this is the right place. That tonight, after avoiding him all fucking day, Harrington had gone out to the farthest possible place to be alone in the forest, like that's a normal thing to do.

Not everything is about you something that sounds like his dad's voice reminds him. Billy shakes it off. He tips his head back to look up at the sky. There's no clouds. He's never seen so many fucking stars. A hundred million tiny, bright pinpricks that break up all the dark. It's the kind of beautiful that would take Billy's breath away if he had the time for shit like that. He might've really liked those stars, once, might have loved lying on his back and staring up at them. Billy rolls his shoulders, looks back down at the road he's walking on, listens to the sound of gravel under his feet and thinks *not anymore*.

There's nothing around him but the sound of dead leaves blowing around, not even traffic. The world had stopped somewhere behind him. Billy's just--here. In the middle of all this nowhere.

He's grateful at least, for the moon. It means he doesn't trip once on his fifteen minute walk from his car out to the edge of the forest. It means he can see the BMW once he finally gets there, pulled up at the treeline like Harrington doesn't give two shits about driving his outrageously expensive car through the middle of some farmer's backyard.

Billy looks at it for a few seconds, but he knows it's empty. He tries the door anyway--locked.

Billy glances back up at the stars. He looks at the treeline. He wishes he had a cigarette, but doesn't want to risk lighting it, doesn't want to chance being so easily seen out here. He isn't sure what he's so scared of being seen by. He tells himself it's the farmer. He's pretty sure that's a lie. There's something creepy and weird about the forests out here in Hawkins, like something is waiting for him in the

shadows.

Billy rolls his shoulders and hopes the thing waiting for him turns out to be Harrington.

In the moonlight, Billy can see his breath fog out in front of his face. It hovers there, staring back at him. He shivers.

Billy walks in a straight line through the trees, out from the BMW. The moonlight is fainter, here. The forest is darker than the field. He has to be careful of rocks and old logs. When he finally sees Harrington, Billy's a few hundred feet deep in the forest and Harrington's standing with his back to Billy, with his hands loose and easy at his side, staring out into the trees.

"You come out here to meditate, pretty boy?" Billy asks, tries to sound disinterested, a little mean. It falls flat, probably because the only reason he'd be out here in the trees is if he's looking for Harrington and they both know Billy's not chasing him down to be an asshole.

Harrington doesn't turn around. Billy can hear him sigh. "What do you want, Billy?"

Billy again. Better than Hargrove.

Billy wants to hold Harrington's hand, no. Billy wants to talk to Harrington--no. At this point, Billy's going to settle for Harrington just fucking *looking* at him. "I want to know if you're meditating," he says.

"I don't think that's any of your business."

"Make it my business," Billy answers. He takes a few steps toward Harrington, but Harrington doesn't move or turn around, so Billy closes the distance between them. He comes up behind Harrington, puts his hands on his hips, presses an open-mouthed kiss to the side of Harrington's neck.

"What the *fuck*, Billy," Harrington snaps. He finally turns around, but it's to shove Billy away. Billy takes a few stumbling steps back, startled.

“What the fuck?” he echoes.

“What part of have a nice life did you not understand?”

“I--” Billy blinks. “--thought you were just being dramatic.”

“You thought I was--” Harrington says, laughing a little. Billy gets the feeling he’s being laughed *at*. “God, do you think about anyone other than yourself?”

It’s not always about you, Billy’s dad’s voice reminds him.

“The kids were watching,” Billy says. “I figured you were just acting like a little bitch for their benefit.”

“I don’t fuck around with that,” Harrington says. “You put hands on Dustin. I wasn’t being dramatic.”

“Oh come on, Harrington,” Billy scoffs. “It’s not like I was going to do any real damage.”

“Because you have such a great track record with that.”

“Don’t be a dick,” Billy says.

“That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Are you actually pissed with me?”

“I’m actually *done* with you.”

Something that had gone loose in Billy’s chest over the last few days curls up in a ball and dies there, calcifies, becomes a hard, leaden weight someplace near his ribs. *Oh*, he thinks, looking at the set of Harrington’s jaw, the corners of his mouth. “Right,” Billy says. “Well. This has been--”

The thought dies in his throat. He doesn’t want whatever the fuck has been going on to be over. He wants to fall asleep in Harrington’s bed again, surrounded by his ugly plaid wallpaper, with Harrington plastered to his back. That’s why he’s been driving all over Hawkins for the last hour. He wants--he wants that again. Billy feels that same,

breathhtaking combination of humiliation and panic that he'd felt in the parking lot that morning, but all that comes out of his mouth is: "I wasn't going to hurt him."

"Yeah, that's exactly what it looked like you weren't going to do."

"I wasn't. Max was--she was weird this morning. I thought he'd told her--"

"He wouldn't tell her."

"He's a kid, Harrington. They're all best friends. He'd tell her anything."

"You know a lot about friends?" Harrington asks him. "Have a lot of those? Heart to hearts with Tommy, with Jason?"

Billy had known a lot about friends once, he thinks. In California. Still, that stings. Billy thinks it's supposed to. "Nevermind," Billy says.

"Billy Hargrove," Harrington says, his voice mocking. "Backing down from a fight."

There's that same hardness on Harrington's face that Billy had seen this morning in the school parking lot. Billy can see it clear as fucking day in the moonlight. Billy had chased the stories about King Steve, but he doesn't think that this hard-edged look in Harrington's eyes is what all the fawning Hawkins kids had been talking about. This isn't some high school king, this is something much stronger. Billy doesn't understand it at all, except to know that the hardness is directed at him, that the dark strength that sometimes seems to be coming off Harrington in waves is because of something Billy did.

Billy doesn't feel sorry often. He doesn't really consider most shit he does to be a mistake. He doesn't consider most of the people he does it to worth the effort of an apology.

"I'm sorry," Billy says. It's the second time he's apologized to Harrington and meant it. The first time was on a Tuesday in a hallway at school, when Harrington still had some fading bruising from what Billy had done to his face.

At least, Billy thinks, he catches Harrington and that dark, unyielding look on his face by fucking surprise. Harrington doesn't say anything back, though. So Billy figures that's that. Conversation over. Another good thing that he fucked up.

Billy shuts his eyes for a second and lets that failure hit him in waves. Then he turns around and walks away. Harrington doesn't call after him, doesn't say anything at all. Billy walks away from him and he watches his breath fog in front of his face in the moonlight. He listens to the leaves, the insects. He glances over his shoulder, once, but Harrington's already turned around. His back is to Billy. He's staring out at the fucking trees again.

Billy stops walking and stares. Harrington looks small in the moonlight, the trees dwarfing him, but he doesn't look afraid. There's something about him, that strength, that darkness. He looks a little brittle, but not like he's afraid of it.

Billy can't do anything but look, for a second. He wants this--one more good look to keep for himself. Billy had come out here looking for Harrington and he'd found him, the one good thing Billy's held in his hands lately. Maybe Billy had been chasing that goodness out here in the trees tonight, but it doesn't fucking matter anymore.

He thinks of Harrington holding his hand that night after the hospital and he waits, lingers. Thinks maybe he could find that good thing out here if he just--if he just *waits*.

But Harrington doesn't turn around.

Billy gives up when the cold creeps under his jacket and goosebumps rise on his skin. He walks back to the Camaro with his hands shoved deep in his pockets and his head bowed. He drives away with music blasting, slamming his hand on the steering wheel, throwing his head back to scream along, the faint taste of salt in the back of his throat.

Whatever. Fuck Hawkins. Shit.

The house, when he gets back to it, is quiet, but Max is waiting by his bedroom door. Her arms are crossed again, her face angry. "You're an asshole," she says, but she keeps her voice low.

“Thanks,” Billy says, because why not? He is an asshole. Everyone’s been fucking telling him that today.

“You didn’t have to go after Dustin like that,” she says. “Did you fight Steve again? Is that what happened to your face?”

“What? No.”

She stares at him. “I know you were with him last night and then this morning your face is all fucked up.”

“I didn’t fight him.”

“You’re an asshole,” Max says. “And a liar. And I hate you.”

“Right,” Billy says. “Sure. Great.”

“Leave my fucking friends alone,” Max says, her voice gone hard as steel. Billy wonders when she got so strong, so fucking unafraid. She turns around, walks into her bedroom, and slams her door. Billy hears his father grumble somewhere else in the house, but he doesn’t make an appearance to blame the door on Billy.

Billy stands there in the hallway for a long time. He thinks about all the different types of doors that’ve been slammed shut in his face tonight.

He walks into his bedroom, closes the door quietly, and sinks down to the floor, his back pressed against it. He fists his hands in his hair, presses his face into his knees, and does his best to fall apart without making any sounds at all.

An asshole.

Maybe that is all he fucking is. Shit.

~

Billy skips last period the next day and drives to a liquor store two towns over, pays some guy he doesn’t know and who doesn’t know him to get him a bottle of bourbon. He wants to get drunk.

He's thinking about how fucking stupid Indiana is as he sits there, shivering in the cold two blocks down from the liquor store, just hoping this guy is going to come back with his money or his booze. In California, he'd have driven or walked or taken a bus to the other side of a city. Here, he drives forty fucking minutes because he needs to go two towns over, just in case someone is a friend of a friend who saw that Hargrove kid buying liquor in town.

He closes his eyes and slumps against the Camaro, cigarette hanging out of his mouth. It's one in the afternoon and the sun is out and it's freezing. He shivers and thinks about school. Harrington hadn't avoided Billy today. Billy had seen him plenty, in the hallway when they were transitioning to classes, by his locker, in the library, in the math class they have together. Billy had seen him plenty and had thought a lot about the way Harrington's hands felt when they dragged over Billy's skin.

Harrington hadn't been thinking of the same shit, apparently, because Billy might as well have been fucking invisible. It was like Harrington suddenly forgot he existed.

Billy had spent most of the day wanting to slam Harrington up against a locker and *make him* remember, make him look at Billy, make him acknowledge him, but he hadn't fucking done that, because he's a coward and he thinks that Harrington is a lot fucking stronger than him in the ways that really matter. He thinks that maybe Harrington would have looked past him, even with Billy's hands on his shoulders. He thinks that Harrington might not have even bothered to call him by his last name.

"You want this or what, kid?"

Billy eyes open. "Yeah," he says, takes the bag from the man he doesn't know. "Thanks."

"Whatever," the guy says, and he's already walking away, cracking open a beer as he goes. Billy gets back into his car and turns up the music, lets the engine growl as he gets on a back road to get to Hawkins.

Max hadn't driven to school with him that morning. His dad hadn't

loved that, had asked where she was when they both waited for her in the kitchen and she didn't appear. Billy had lied, eventually, pretended he'd forgotten she'd gone to school early with a friend.

"You don't think," his dad had said from where he was sitting with his coffee at the table. "You never think, Billy. How could you be so--" It's not the only thing he'd said, but Billy's pushing the rest of the words and sentiment out of his mind. Max hadn't driven to school with him that morning and there's only one other person who would pick her up. Harrington had been outside his house that morning to pick up his sister, but he hadn't acknowledged that Billy was alive all fucking day.

Billy doesn't know where he wants to go to get drunk. He doesn't really want to go home, even though his dad won't be back for a few hours, and he doesn't really want to go to the quarry because he doesn't want to have to fucking share. He ends up back at home, though, shuts his bedroom door and lies on his bed and doesn't even get to really drink before he fucking rolls over on his side and just goes to sleep, like some sad sack of shit, because that's what he fucking is.

~

Billy wakes up after dinner, which means Susan is working late. Billy's dad doesn't much care if Billy eats when Susan isn't around to play house. He drops the bourbon out the window, grabs his car keys, and then follows it down. He's not really sure where he wants to go, but he'd squandered any hope of alone time with his stupid fucking nap and he definitely doesn't want to be in the house anymore.

His dad will be mad if he catches him gone, but if Susan isn't around and his dad doesn't want to go back out, it's pretty unlikely he'll be looking for Billy at all.

He ends up at the diner because he's fucking hungry, convinces Tommy--who is there with Carol, who is always somewhere public waiting for someone else to show up--to buy him dinner. It doesn't take a lot of work. Tommy's pretty eager to please. Billy laughs at a few of his jokes and pretends he's listening to his stories and he gets a half-decent sandwich and some really good fries out of the deal.

They see a movie after, sneak in and sit in the back. Tommy and Carol are all over each other, but Billy doesn't mind. He throws his feet up at the seat in front of him and enjoys the fact that it annoys people sitting around him. He'll tolerate Tommy and Carol and their weird attachment to one another tonight if it means he doesn't have to spend another fucking second feeling like he doesn't exist.

After the movie, Carol says it's getting late with a look so pointed at Tommy that Billy wants to tell her she might as well just say she wants to suck his dick. He doesn't tell her that, though. He says goodbye and wanders back toward the diner parking lot, thinking about the last time he got his dick sucked. That would be Harrington, actually. It's been a while.

Billy wants to see Harrington, then. It washes over him the same way it had the night before. He wants to see Harrington and it feels like his heartbeat won't settle until he does.

He gets into his car and drives. He thinks about the fact that his dad hadn't really said anything to him today except the "Where's your sister" conversation and Billy hadn't really said anything to him except "She's not my sister" and then the lie about a friend picking her up early for a project. And then he'd listened as his father droned on and on, mean, reminding Billy of exactly how fucking useless he is.

Max and Harrington, the two people at the root of that conversation and the storm of emotions battering Billy's chest, hadn't spoken to him once. No one is fucking talking to him, today.

Tommy and Carol don't fucking count. Billy feels like he's going crazy. He feels a little invisible, but only to the people who matter to him. How fucking sad is that? The people who matter to him: his dad, Max, and Steve fucking Harrington. Amazing.

Still, Billy wants to see Harrington. So he drives out away from the center of town to look.

Billy checks the farm from last night, first, but there's no sign of the BMW at the treeline. Billy wastes thirty minutes roundtrip on the walk from the side of the road out to the forest and back to check. He

drives all over town, thinking about how much it fucking sucks to feel invisible, to be an asshole, thinking that maybe he should just fucking give up and go home, when he passes a long driveway and--

--He nearly misses it, the faint flash of metal caught in his headlights. He throws the Camaro in reverse, parks, and gets out to investigate. It's the BMW, but now that Billy's found it, he's not sure what he wants to do.

Well, he is sure. He wants to see Harrington. Billy frowns at the empty BMW, at the Camaro sitting parked on the road behind him, at the trees and the darkness and the stupid fucking moon. Billy frowns and he leans against the BMW and thinks he'll just wait Harrington out.

I'm done with you. That's what Harrington had said. Maybe Billy should just go home.

"What the hell are you doing on my property?"

Billy looks up and squares his shoulders, but there's no one there looking at him. It's the darkness, maybe, that has him so jumpy. If he'd been paying attention and not replaying Harrington's words in his mind, maybe he would've recognized how faint the voice sounded before he'd gotten ready for a fight. The voice is mean and definitely angry, but it's also not talking to him.

Of course, Billy's one of two people trespassing tonight, which means that voice is talking to the owner of the BMW Billy's leaning against. "Shit," he says, pushing off it.

The driveway crests up to a hill. Billy walks quickly toward the sound of voices. He hears Harrington next. "Do any more of your trees look like this?" he's asking, oblivious to or ignoring the irritation in that other voice.

"Are you dumb or something, kid?" the owner of the voice--the farmer, Billy assumes, says. "What the hell are you doing on my farm?"

Billy reaches the top of the hill and looks down the rest of the

driveway. He can see them, then. Harrington and the farmer, about halfway down the hill. The moon is doing Billy all sorts of favors this week. He can see Harrington's jittering fingers, first, the bounce in his knee. Billy would look at Harrington longer, but it's the farmer's stance that seems pressing.

He's tall, taller than Harrington. Bigger too. He's standing with his arms crossed, glowering down at Harrington. Billy doesn't like the way he's looming over Harrington at fucking all.

"Do any more of your trees look like this?" Harrington demands again. "Do any of them look like that one?" He's pointing to a tree to the farmer's left, but the farmer doesn't turn.

"Get the fuck off my property," the farmer says. Then he raises his hand and knocks Harrington's arm down. He knocks it down hard. Billy watches Harrington stumble, watches surprise cross his face.

Billy reaches the bottom of the hill, nearly to the two of them, just as Harrington snaps, "'Answer my fucking question! Do any more of your trees look like that one? It's *important!*'"

Billy's almost there. He's *almost* there. He just needs a few more feet--

The farmer pulls back his fist and punches Harrington right across the face. Like he had when Billy hit him, Harrington goes down hard.

Billy moves mostly on instinct after that. "Back up," he snarls, half diving between the farmer and Harrington, who is slowly pulling himself back to his feet. "Back the fuck up. Get away from him," Billy says again. There's an edge of fear to his words, of desperation, but he hides it well. He grins, mean. Billy licks his lips. He's fucking ready.

That motherfucker put *hands* on *Harrington* and Billy is going to rip his fucking face off.

"What are you, the boyfriend? You little freaks out here on my land to meet up and suck each other's dicks?"

Probably not, Billy thinks, a little rueful. He'd fucked that chance right up. He grins wider anyway. "Yeah," he says, real slow, lets his

voice go low and mean. "I'm the fucking boyfriend," and then he slams his fist into the farmer's face. Maybe the farmer isn't expecting it from the *boyfriend*. Maybe he's big enough people don't usually throw a punch. Either way, he goes down hard on his ass.

He's getting ready to scramble to his feet when Billy plants a foot right in the middle of his chest, leans down over him. "You try and get up," Billy says to him, "And I'll *fuck you up*. Do you understand me? We'll leave. You stay down until we're gone."

He waits until the farmer nods. "I didn't fucking hear you," Billy says, hates himself as he says it, as the words and their origin bounce around his brain.

"Yeah," the farmer says, looking at Billy's foot on his chest. "I hear you."

Billy nods, "Pleasure doing business with you," he says, patting his cheek. Then he turns around.

Harrington is standing behind him, eyes wide, one hand pressed against his cheek. "The tree--"

"Shut the fuck up," Billy hisses, doesn't use Harrington's name even though he wants to, doesn't think it's a good idea for the farmer to know when Billy just declared himself Harrington's fucking boyfriend. That was stupid. He doesn't really regret it, though. Billy catches Harrington by the wrist and yanks him away, not running though. He stays calm, doesn't want the farmer to smell blood in the water. Billy's fucking angry and wired. He's embarrassed. He's such a fucking coward.

Maybe he should act scared. Maybe the farmer will sit up and give Billy a good fucking *reason* to work out some of his emotions.

They make it back over the hill, down to Harrington's car. Billy doesn't let him go, not even as they slow to a stop. He stands so he can see over the hill just in case the farmer decides to give chase.

Billy crowds Harrington against the side of the car, catches his jaw in one hand and tilts his head, trying to check his face in the faint light

of the moon. "Are you okay?" Billy demands.

"I'm not your fucking boyfriend. Get the fuck off me," Harrington hisses, shoving at Billy's shoulders.

Billy steps back, palms raised. "Are you okay?" he says again.

Harrington's rubbing at his cheek. "I'm fucking fine, Billy. I didn't need you to *rescue* me."

Billy feels like he's on fire, burning up from rage as he says, "He fucking *hit you*. I should fucking kill him."

Harrington's gaze is still a little hard, a little cold. "It wasn't too long ago you were hitting me."

Billy glances away, up the hill. "That was different."

"I don't know if it was, Billy."

"I didn't--I wasn't trying to hurt you. I didn't want to hurt you. I just couldn't stop."

"You wanted to hurt him. You stopped."

Billy smacks his hand against the top of the BMW, still won't look at Harrington. "I wanted to get you out of there more," he says through clenched teeth.

"I'm not your boyfriend."

"I'm not the boyfriend type."

Billy hears Harrington sigh. Billy still can't look at him. Harrington says, "Right. Sure thing. Are *you* okay?"

Billy can't fucking look at him. "Are you ever going to talk to me again?" he asks, more whisper than question, embarrassed even as he needs to know. His knuckles ache. He fucks up every good thing he's ever touched.

"Jesus, Billy. I don't know, all right? You just lost it on Dustin."

"I told you. I thought--"

"I don't *care* what you thought, Billy. Fuck. There's not a good reason for it. There's no good reason to put hands on a kid like you did and you of all people should fucking know that."

Billy shuts his eyes, can't look at Harrington, can't look at the hill, can't fucking look at anything. "I'm sorry," he mumbles, the third time he's apologized to Harrington and meant it. "I'm fucking sorry. I won't--I won't do it again." He feels like he's begging. He hears Harrington move. He's surprised when he feels Harrington's hands on his shoulders, but Billy can't open his fucking eyes, doesn't want to see it. "I won't do it again," Billy repeats. *Please*, he thinks. Harrington can't be done with him. Billy's been driving out into these woods looking for one good thing and Harrington's *it*.

Billy stops breathing when he feels Harrington's fingers at his jaw, turning his head. When Harrington's lips press against his, Billy can't help the sound he makes low in the back of his throat. He parts his lips for Harrington's tongue, desperate for closeness, backs Harrington up until he's pressed against the car. Billy slots a leg between Harrington's thighs and cups Harrington's cheek and wants to stay like this for fucking ever.

He feels Harrington smiling as he pulls back a little. "We can't do this here," Harrington murmurs. "That farmer is probably getting his gun."

"God, what the fuck hick town am I in?" Billy asks against Harrington's lips. He wants to go someplace and hold Harrington's hand all night. "Don't--" he stops. Tries to figure out what he wants to say. "Don't be done with me."

Harrington sighs, "I'm clearly not done with you," he says. "But those kids? That's my line, Billy. Don't ever fucking cross it."

Billy thinks that he might be a monster, but he's a selfish one. He'll never touch a hair on that kid's head ever again.

There's a sound in the distance like a screen door slamming. Billy meets Harrington's gaze in the moonlight.

“We should go,” Billy says.

“My house?” Harrington asks.

“See you there,” Billy agrees.

It’s a long, desolate drive following Harrington to the house. Billy wishes the whole fucking way there that Harrington were holding his hand.

He’s never known relief like this. He’s never lost something only to get it back. Everything that Billy’s ever lost has left him in its dust, has left him with all the scars to prove he made it through, the edges to prove he could do it again. Tonight, looking at Harrington under the light of the moon, he’d been thinking about what it would mean to lose this for good. He’d been thinking about what it would mean for Harrington to consider Billy’s value, to be found wanting.

That isn’t what happened, though, Billy thinks, drumming his fingers on his steering wheel as he drives. Now he’s put all his cards on the table. He’d been halfway to begging and Harrington knows it. Billy doesn’t think there’s a facade left that would trick Harrington into believing Billy’s fucking weakness had been a trick of the moonlight.

And isn’t that what his dad has always said, that Billy’s weak, that he just gives in, that not everything’s about him and couldn’t he *try* a little harder? Billy feels heat behind his eyes, feels like a coward, feels like he’d follow Harrington through Hell if it meant he could feel this relief for the rest of his fucking life.

Harrington can never know, Billy realizes, how much this fucking means to Billy. He might already have an idea, but Billy can’t give him any more of one.

Still, they end up out back by the pool, a bottle of bourbon between them. Harrington’s staring at the water with something like suspicion and he looks tired and Billy just wants to hold his fucking hand.

“This is disgusting,” Harrington says, taking a sip from the bourbon.
“This is cheap shit.”

Billy rolls his eyes. “Not everyone’s mommy and daddy own the town

or whatever. I got what I could get.”

Harrington smiles at him. It’s fleeting, but there. “I can’t believe you said you were my boyfriend,” Harrington mumbles, but he’s laughing when he says it.

“Sometimes it’s easier to live down to people’s expectations.”

“Oh, you think being my boyfriend would be living *down*?”

Billy shrugs. “To him, maybe. To a lot of people.”

Harrington’s quiet for a long time. Finally, he grabs Billy’s hand and tangles their fingers together. “He really interrupted my meditation,” Harrington jokes.

“Do you really go out into the woods like that to meditate?”

“No,” Harrington says. “It’s more like--” he shrugs. “It’s more like keeping watch.”

“On the *trees*?” Billy asks. He reaches around to grab the bottle, takes a long, slow sip from it, lets the bourbon burn all the way down to his belly.

He’s still holding Harrington’s hand, so he can feel it, the way that Harrington goes tense all the way through his fingertips. “Something like that,” he says, vaguely.

Billy frowns. Harrington was fucking obsessed with whatever was up with that tree. Had gotten himself punched in the face over it. “What did you find?” he asks. “What did that tree look like?”

“Like death,” Harrington says, mostly a whisper. When Billy looks at him, Harrington is staring into the pool. “It looked like death.”

Notes for the Chapter:

You can find me on tumblr @lymricks where I like prompts, the west wing, and poetry excerpts. Also these two.

5. V

Steve is thinking about the inevitability of catastrophe, feeling maudlin and exhausted, a little after 4 in the morning when Billy shifts in his arms and rolls over. “You’re awake?” Billy asks.

After the bourbon by the pool, after Steve’s declaration that the tree looked *like death*, after he’d had trouble following the course of the conversation, after he hadn’t been able to stop staring at the glow from the pool, Billy had stood up with a heavy sigh. Steve had looked up at him, cast in that blue, watery light, Billy’s eyes glowing from it, and he had wondered if this was the part where Billy left.

Billy hadn’t left.

He’d held his hands out and pulled Steve to his feet. Steve had trailed Billy through his own house, had stripped off his clothes and crawled into bed with Billy thinking of the way death looks on trees, of the way it smells. He had curled around Billy like his bedroom and the blankets and his arm around Billy’s waist could keep them both safe. He’d known even as he did it that nothing would keep them safe.

The truth beats against his eyelids every time he shuts them: Monsters are real. Monsters are real. Monsters are real.

Monsters are *coming*.

“Harrington?” Billy says, his voice bedroom quiet. He shifts, lifts himself up on one elbow so that he’s looking down at Steve, who wonders if Billy can see all of the ways he’s broken. If he can see all of the ways that Steve’s ready to crack open and leak everything left inside him out onto the floor, until he’s finally just the shell he’s so afraid that he’s becoming.

“Have you slept at all?” Billy asks. Steve wants to curl up inside the sleepy rasp in Billy’s voice, the soft warmth in it. If either of them were more awake Billy might work harder to hide that warmth, but they aren’t and he doesn’t.

Steve shakes his head. “Just thinking.”

“About your death tree,” Billy says.

“Yeah,” Steve answers, still peering up at Billy, “About my death tree. And the way it--the way it smells.” He can’t sleep because of it, the image of that tree in his head, the smell of it in his nose. He’s not sure if he actually smelled it at the farm tonight or if his brain just remembers that scent, if it is filling in the blanks for him to make it feel as real as it fucking is.

Steve’s cheek aches from where the farmer hit him, but it’s a grounding sort of pain, makes him feel alive in the way every thrown elbow in basketball practice makes him feel real, tangible, like he isn’t floating away. It’s grounding in the way that--in the weeks after the Byers’s house, when Steve’s face had still been healing--Steve would prod at his bruises and hiss in pain and think that he hadn’t disappeared yet, not if he could still hurt.

He’s maybe a little fucked up.

When you know exactly what goes bump in the night, you don’t go out into the forest alone after dark unless you’re a little bit fucked up.

“What does death smell like to you?” Billy asks.

“Like--” Steve pauses. “Cold. Kind of like burning, but not fire. Like an old fire, kind of damp ashes? Like--” he hesitates. “Stinging and wet and burning.” Steve wants to emphasize the burning.

Billy scoots back in the bed, sitting so he’s resting against Steve’s headboard. After a second he cards his fingers through Steve’s hair, tugs a bit, and Steve shuffles closer with that guidance until he’s resting against Billy’s stomach, his sore cheek against warm, soft skin.

“For me,” Billy says, “It smells clean. Not like laundry or something, but like hospital.” He swallows. “Stale clean. I hate hospitals.”

Steve doesn’t ask. He shifts a little so he can press a kiss to Billy’s stomach. He feels the way Billy’s muscles tense and Steve smiles against his skin, does it again.

Billy’s exhale is shaky through his nose. His fingers tighten in Steve’s hair and Steve leans into that sting, laughs. He tips his head up to

look at Billy as he kisses again, slides his tongue over warm muscle.

Billy shivers, eyes half closed. Steve scoots a little bit lower.

“Hey,” Billy says, tugging at his hair again. Grounding. Billy wriggles a little underneath him, slips down the bed until he’s against the pillow and Steve’s head is somewhere near his chest. “C’mere, Harrington,” Billy says, tugging at his leg until Steve throws it across Billy’s hips. They are full on cuddling now and Steve had been pretty ready to take things up a notch before Billy *stopped him*.

Steve wonders if Billy’s drunk or stupid or both.

“Sleep,” Billy says. Steve peers up at him.

“You gotta go soon,” Steve mumbles, but it’s a weak protest as he relaxes into Billy’s warmth. Billy’s like a fucking furnace, like he keeps all the sunlight in California trapped under his skin.

“Not yet,” Billy says. “Sleep, Harrington. Come on. You’re tired.”

Steve sleeps.

He’s not surprised when he wakes up and Billy is gone.

~

Steve skips first period to tell Hopper.

The idea of walking down the hallway and looking at his classmates and acting fucking *normal* when he knows what’s coming makes him feel awful. He doesn’t want to tell Hopper, but he has to. Anyway, he has second period with Billy and Steve thinks it might be nice to see Billy after he tells Hopper that the world is going to end again, that they’re all in danger again, no one more than little Jane.

It’s unseasonably warm today, the sun burning bright in a way it has no right to. It makes everything look a little hazy at eight am when he parks outside the station. It’s cold, still, but more damp than anything. Biting because of it. That chill creeps under his jacket and sinks deep into his skin. Spring is thinking about arriving, but it sure as shit isn’t here yet.

Steve shivers when he walks into the station, suddenly engulfed by warm air. The change in temperature is a little unnerving.

“Mr. Harrington,” Florence says when the door chimes above him. Steve has his hands shoved into his pockets. He smiles.

“I’m here to see Hop,” he says.

“Of course you are,” she says, peering over her desk at him. “Aren’t you supposed to be in school, young man?”

“I’m a senior.”

“I think those still have school,” she laughs. Florence stands, smoothing out her shirt. “I think he’s finishing up a phone call, but I’ll tell him you’re here. Why don’t you sit while you wait.”

Steve collapses into the chair near her desk, kicks his feet out. He can’t remember the last time he felt so tired.

Well, actually, yes he can. That same smell he can’t forget had been clinging to his skin then, too.

“Here,” Florence says, her voice gentle. She’s holding out an apple. “Eat this.” She waves it at him. Steve takes it. “You’re so thin,” she clucks at him. He hears her knock twice on Hopper’s door, push it open. “Mr. Harrington is here to see you,” she says. “Again.” She pauses, seems to be listening. “The *again* should probably tell you which Mr. Harrington it is, Hop.” He can’t hear when Hopper says, but he hears affection and a little bit of an eye-roll in Florence’s voice when she says, “I’ll tell him, then.” She comes back out. “You go on in,” she says. “Finish that apple.”

Steve takes a big bite, is still chewing on it when he walks into Hopper’s office and pushes the door shut behind him.

“You look like shit,” Hopper says.

“Very professional,” Steve answers, dropping down into the seat in front of Hopper’s desk. He takes another bite of the apple. It’s sweet and crisp. He wants to bury his nose in it and remember what life smells like.

"Don't you have school or something?"

"I'm a senior."

"They still have school, kid," Hopper says and Steve wants to tell him that he sounds like Florence.

Instead he says, "I found a tree last night on the Jameston farm."

"Congratulations."

Steve shifts forward in the seat, tosses the apple into Hopper's trash, puts his elbows on his knees and clasps them. "No," he says. "Hop. I found a *tree*."

Hopper puts his coffee down very slowly. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying something is back."

"We closed the gate."

"Well then it's fucking open, Hop. I don't know what to tell you. I just know what I saw last night."

Hopper's looking at Steve like he doesn't believe him. "Listen," he says. "The last month has been tough for everyone. You're going through this mostly on your--"

"I'm not crazy. It's there. Go see it for yourself if you don't believe me. Jesus," Steve says, standing up. "I'm telling you it's fucking there. They're fucking back, okay?"

"All right, all right," Hopper says. "Take it easy. I'll check it out."

Steve feels a little guilty for snapping, because if he doesn't want to believe it, then Hopper must really not want to believe it. It's easier for everyone if Steve's just having a tough time, manifesting nightmares on his midnight walks through the forest.

"I know it's not what we wanted," Steve says, half an apology.

"Yeah," Hopper says. "It really isn't." He picks up some papers on his

desk but then drops them again. He looks at Steve hard for a second. "Listen--El says you've been spending a lot of time with Billy Hargrove."

Steve looks away, wonders how much she knows. "He's always around. Because of Max," he says, the same half-truth he told Dustin. The one that went over so fucking well.

"Sure," Hopper says. Steve gets the feeling there's more he wants to say, but instead he grabs his hat and drops it on his head. "Did Hargrove do that to your face?" he asks. Steve feels the bruise on his cheek throb under Hopper's attention.

"Uh, no," Steve says. "Maybe don't tell Mr. Jameston that I'm the one who told you."

Hopper frowns. "How exactly did you find out about this tree?"

"Uh," Steve says. "Definitely not trespassing." He's a horrible liar, but he doesn't think Hopper's going to want to hear about his little midnight patrols. Isn't sure he wants to tell him. "Definitely not trying to find a good place to drink." Steve's a terrible liar, but he's hoping he's got enough of a history that this sticks.

He remembers Billy, suddenly, saying he was Steve's boyfriend. "If uh," Steve says. "If it comes up, though. I was--" he hesitates, thinks of Billy's declaration that being boyfriends would be *living down* to a lot of people. Steve's shit at secrets. He doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

"Yeah, kid?" Hopper's looking at him and Steve knows he's blushing all the way down his throat.

"Billy and I--" he pauses. "We're friends? But--if." Fuck. What does he even say? "Mr. Jameston is going to probably tell you there were two of us there and that we said we were boyfriends."

Hopper's mouth twitches somewhere near a smile. "Right," Hopper says. "I don't really care what you and Billy Hargrove get up to in your spare time."

"It's just," Steve says, then all in a rush, "Billy's dad can't know he

was there. Billy's name can't come up and you can't tell anyone, okay? It can't--no one can know about Billy being there."

Hopper lights a cigarette. "Probably better neither of your names come up," he says. "Given the government agencies involved and the trespassing." He exhales smoke out of the side of his mouth and pushes his hand down a little on his head. "I can say it's some kids from out of town. Already gave them a citation."

"Ok," Steve says. "But Billy's dad can't know."

Hopper takes a slow drag. "You're awfully insistent about that," he says. "Any reason in particular?" The look on his face says he has a guess about what Steve isn't saying.

And Steve tells the truth, then, the same truth that he and Billy have been telling each other on and off as they've come together. "Monsters are real," Steve says, "And that means different things for different people."

The cigarette hangs between Hopper's lips for a second, his gaze is heavy on Steve. After what feels like way too long, he nods. "Sure," he says.

Steve shows Florence the core of the apple when he walks by her a few minutes later. "Stop skipping classes, Mr. Harrington!" she calls after him.

~

When Steve stumbles into second period ten minutes late, Billy is slouched in a seat in the back. Steve apologizes to the teacher and grabs the last remaining desk in the back of the room. There's a lot of space between him and Billy. He's so aware of it that for a minute it actually stings. Steve's staring at the notes, trying to catch up on a few of the steps he'd missed, when he feels something hit his temple.

He startles, but when he turns around Billy's staring out the window. There's something almost like a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Steve looks down and scoops up the crumpled ball of paper that'd hit

him, smoothes it out slowly.

You were late, the note reads. *Everything good?*

It's the first time that Steve's seen Billy's handwriting and he's a little distracted by it, by how small and neat the letters are, by how skinny it is on the paper, by how lightly he must have pressed his pencil to the sheet. It's the first time Steve's seen Billy's handwriting and it's a *note* to him and that feels intimate, too, like the first time--god, two nights ago? Three?--when they had curled up together in bed.

Steve doesn't know what to do with all this intimacy. He's busy trying not to crack open or dry up, but here Billy is, coaxing Steve's head to rest on his stomach, writing Steve notes to make sure he's okay, filling Steve with all these little bursts of something hot and golden like California sunshine even as Steve feels like everything else is being drained out of him.

Monsters are coming.

Billy noticed he was late.

It's kind of a lot to deal with, this dichotomy of death and warmth bubbling up inside his chest.

Steve takes the note and smoothes it out, sticks it in his notebook so he can save it, and doesn't send one back because Billy may be the class bad boy, but Steve knows for a fact that he also has the highest grade in the class, that he could get away with it if he got caught, that he'd flash a charming smile and a perfect answer to a question the teacher hadn't even finished asking. Steve does well in math, above average even, but he's not risking a detention.

When he feels eyes on him, Steve turns to Billy, offers half a smile across the classroom, gives him a thumbs up. Billy rolls his eyes so hard that Steve worries they're going to get stuck that way, but he doesn't throw anything else at Steve for the rest of class.

~

It's hard to find a fucking moment alone after that. Steve spends most of the day trying to push down jitters, trying to focus on what's in

front of him and not on a tree far away in the forest. He wishes he could talk to Billy, for a second.

Finally, basketball begins. *Finally*, basketball ends.

Billy takes approximately three million years to change after practice. Steve has to fake having left something behind to wait long enough for everyone to leave and for Billy to come out of the gym. Steve knows the bruises that dot Billy's skin, an ugly yellow and purple patchwork, knows that Billy's lagging behind because he wants to hide it. Still, the only class they have together is second period and aside from the note, Steve feels like they haven't gotten a fucking second to talk all day.

He doesn't know why that bothers him so much. He was fine before Billy Hargrove. He should be fine for a few hours.

Steve's still feeling a little on edge from the conversation with Hopper that morning, a little--no, okay, fine--*really* fucking scared because of what he knows is going on with that tree.

Steve wants to go out into the woods and burn that stupid tree down and then he wants to stalk the forest looking for whatever is coming. That's a stupid plan, now that he knows something is, but it's what he really wants to do. He feels like maybe it'll be the only way he doesn't completely unravel. He's hoping Billy's going to give him a better option.

Steve slumps against the wall, slides down the bricks and pulls his knees up once he settles on the ground. The parking lot is empty, now, just Steve's car and the Camaro in the hazy light of early evening. Not even coach is still here. There's probably a custodian somewhere or Billy would be--locked in? Steve doesn't actually know what happens in the school after dark.

He has to wait a long time, but finally Billy emerges, his curls still damp from the shower. He almost trips over Steve, looks a little surprised to see him.

"Thought you left," Billy says.

"I waited for you," Steve answers, patting the ground next to him. After a second, Billy drops down. Their knees bump. Steve wants to hold Billy's hand.

"You were late to school," Billy says, which is what his note had said this morning. He doesn't ask *are you okay*, but Steve hears the question all the same.

"Yeah," he says. "I had to go talk to Hopper about my tree."

"Tattling, what a surprise from a good boy like you," Billy says, but he's smiling.

Steve looks around, reaches across and trails his fingertips over the back of Billy's hand. He feels Billy go still beneath his fingers and, after a second, Billy turns his palm over and Steve tangles their fingers together and they sit there, half shaded by the gym, tucked away beside the empty school. It is the farthest from unravelling Steve has felt all fucking day.

They sit there like that until they're both shivering from the cold, until the parking lot is dark, until snow starts drifting from the sky. Steve stands reluctantly when Billy does. "I have to go home," Billy says, and Steve thinks of his own big, empty house and tries not to panic.

They kiss. Slow and sweet and lingering, before Billy shoves his hands in his pockets and drives away. Steve hesitates, on the precipice of driving out through the snow to poke at things that shouldn't be poked, but at the last second he takes the turn onto Dustin's road and shows up uninvited.

Mrs. Henderson answers the door. "Steve," she says, with a warm smile. She tuts when she sees the bruising on his face. "Basketball is such a rough sport," she laments, ushering him inside. She brushes the snow off his shoulders and looks at him for a moment, holding him there. "Is everything all right, dear?" she asks, dropping her voice a little soft. "You look upset."

Steve feels upset, but it's not her burden. It isn't Dustin's either. There's just something else they need to talk about. "I'm just tired

from practice,” Steve lies. “Y’know. It is a rough sport.” He offers her a bright smile, his Company Smile, the one his dad had trained him to offer up when clients came to dinner. She looks suspicious, but placated.

“Dusty’s in his room,” she says, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “You know the way. Are you staying for dinner?”

Steve looks around the warm little front room and wishes he could say yes, but he’s not sure how this conversation is gonna go. “I have to head home in a bit,” he says. “Next time. Thank you.” And then he’s making his way down the hallway and knocking in a pattern on Dustin’s bedroom door.

Dustin rips the door open before Steve can finish. “I thought you’d *died*,” he hisses, grabbing Steve’s wrist and yanking him into his bedroom.

“You worry a lot about me dying.”

“Death is a scientific reality,” Dustin says primly. “It doesn’t mean I have to like it.” He sits down on his bed. “I got a new comic,” he adds, waving it for Steve to see.

Steve drops down to sit on the floor, knees bent, hooks his arms loosely around them. “We gotta talk about Billy.”

Dustin’s expression, when Steve looks up, is difficult to read. “Do we really?”

“If he touches you again,” Steve says, “I’m the first person you tell.”

Dustin holds his gaze, looks a little thoughtful. “He seemed different,” he says. “In your bathroom. Like a human person.”

“He is a human person, Dustin,” Steve says.

“That hasn’t been proven. Anyway,” Dustin shrugs, “he wasn’t going to hurt me.”

Steve blinks. “He was shaking you by your shoulders.”

“Sure,” Dustin nods. “But his eyes didn’t look like he was gonna hurt me. He looked scared.”

“Scared people hurt people, Dustin,” Steve says. “You can’t let what you know about him make you stupid.”

“Why am I the one defending Billy in this conversation?” Dustin asks. “I don’t know. He wasn’t going to hurt me. I was scared, but it didn’t feel like he was going to hurt me.”

“You brought home a demodog and fed it candy,” Steve says. “I’m not sure I trust your instincts.”

“Billy’s not a demodog,” Dustin says.

But he can be a monster, Steve thinks. Feels guilty. Thinks it anyway. “I know that, dipshit.”

“What are we even talking about?” Dustin asks. “You guys are whatever now. That’s fine. He can’t come to game night at Mike’s. That requires a party vote, but I guess he can come here when you come to dinner if he wants. My mom liked him. No one ever *really* likes her cooking. Not even you, Mr. Manners. It’s fine, okay? Shut up about it.”

Steve smiles because everything is fucking complicated, but Dustin’s looking at him from under the brim of his hat like he’s the dumbest person Dustin’s ever met and it’s so fucking nice. It feels normal, like the kind of thing that would happen in a world where monsters don’t exist.

A tree branch scratches at Dustin’s window and they both turn to look at it, stare at the darkness outside holding their breath.

This isn’t, Steve knows, a world where monsters don’t exist. “I think I like him,” Steve says, because maybe they’ll all die tomorrow. It’s a horrible thought, but also a little freeing.

Dustin looks from the window back to Steve. “I mean,” he says. “Obviously?”

Steve blinks. “What?”

"You guys were alone in a bathroom together for like four years," Dustin says slowly. "When I walked up to you by that tree you were basically holding him up. No shit you like him."

"Uh," Steve says.

"You want to tell him what we're really doing?" Dustin mimics and Steve knows that Dustin's approximating his voice from the other night. "Jesus, Steve. I'm in eighth grade. Not kindergarten."

"Uh."

"Are you staying for dinner or what?" Dustin asks.

"You can't tell anyone," Steve says. "You can't tell Max."

"I am," Dustin says, very very slowly, "In eighth grade. Not kindergarten."

Steve doesn't know what that means. "I don't--"

Dustin spits into his palm, holds out his hand to Steve, catches Steve's gaze. "I won't tell anyone," he says. He makes it sound at once like a promise and like Steve is maybe the dumbest person he ever met.

Steve makes a face, spits into his own hand, shakes Dustin's.

Dustin beams at him.

~

Hopper calls Steve at home two nights later when the shadows seem unending and he's alone.

"You're right," he says.

"What do we do?" Steve asks, straightening up and bouncing his leg.

"We wait, kid" Hopper says. "We get ready."

Steve looks out the window at the forest beyond his house and swallows hard. "We keep watch," he says.

“Something like that,” Hopper agrees. Steve doesn’t think he realizes that Steve means it literally.

After they hang up, Steve is walking back to put the phone in the living room when he glances at the window at all the darkness outside and just--sits down on the floor. He scoots until his back is against the wall and loops his arms around his knees and looks out the window, like he can’t look away.

Monsters are real. Monsters are coming.

It’s a calm that hits him then, not a panic. It prickles from the center of his chest and he feels cold from it, maybe a little numb. He stares out the window and knows that he isn’t going to be fucking caught off guard.

Billy had asked him that morning, kind of in passing, kind of between the two of them, maybe not to go out to farms alone at night anymore.

“You worried about me?” Steve had teased.

“That guy--” Billy had started, jaw set.

Steve had grinned, couldn’t help it. Had said that he wasn’t going to go out alone. Had *lied* because he and Billy don’t have plans tonight and the darkness is pawing at Steve’s window. He tips his head back against the wall and shuts his eyes, but it doesn’t go away, the certainty that he needs to do something.

On the street outside, an engine growls. Loud. Familiar.

Steve scrambles to his feet, grabs his jacket, grabs his keys, slams the door locked shut behind him. He leaves on every light in the house as he half jogs down the front lawn.

Billy shouldn’t fucking be here. Steve has shit to do.

“I didn’t expect to see you,” Steve says, grateful for the Camaro holding his weight up when he looks in the window. Billy makes a noncommittal sound. All Steve can see is the cigarette floating in the dark in front of his face. Steve pulls the door open, drops into the

passenger's seat and looks hard at the side of Billy's face, at the floating cigarette. This far from the house there isn't much to see, not with the door closed, not where Billy's parked so far from the streetlights. "What're you doing here, Hargrove?" Steve asks, the last name slipping from his lips before he can stop it. He's not sure if he's excited Billy's here or mad about it, but he knows that Billy--who only ever calls him fucking Harrington--notes every time Steve goes back to Hargrove.

He regrets it, that urge to needle, to prick, when Billy pulls the cigarette from his mouth and it wobbles. His fingers are shaking. "Thought you might like to go for a drive," Billy says. He doesn't look at Steve when he says it. Steve feels himself frown. Billy doesn't show up at his unannounced. They don't *do* that.

Billy doesn't pull away from the curb, so Steve cracks open the car door. The light that floods the front of the Camaro is all at once too bright and not enough. He squints at Billy's face, but it's all fading bruises. Nothing new. He wants to ask what happened, but suddenly doesn't know how. "Bil--"

Billy shoves the cigarette back in his mouth, darts out and grabs Steve's hand so fast Steve almost flinches. Billy yanks, presses Steve's palm against his side, where rib cage meets the softer flesh of his abdomen. Soft, Steve thinks a little hysterically, is not exactly how he'd describe Billy's abs, but it's not ribs, either. Steve's palm pushes into the skin, held there by Billy's grip, and Billy hisses as the heel of Steve's palm digs in.

"Billy!" Steve snaps, looking at the hurt at the corners of Billy's mouth. He rips his wrist out of Billy grip and shifts in the seat, pulls aside denim jacket and lifts up white t-shirt to look at the skin of Billy's side. The light still seems too dim, but it's enough to see it--purple and red almost black and *darkdarkdark* against Billy's skin. Steve sucks in a breath through his teeth and runs his fingers over the bruise. It's huge. It's ugly. Steve can't imagine how much it hurts. At even this light touch, Billy hisses again, but when Steve looks up he's staring straight ahead.

"Billy," Steve says, slow, careful, like he's afraid of spooking him. "What happened?"

Billy takes a long drag from the cigarette, pulls it away from his mouth to exhale smoke. He's staring straight ahead still, jaw tight. "He said--" he starts, then stops. "He said--" But he doesn't finish. Doesn't seem to want to say it out loud. His mouth goes tight and he doesn't look at Steve. There's a long, heavy silence in the car, just Billy breathing too sharp, Steve staring at his face, before Billy finally says, "So anyway. I thought you might want to go for a drive."

Steve can still taste the *Hargrove* on his tongue. He shifts away to pull the door shut. The car is dark again, hard to see in, just Billy's cigarette glowing orange in front of them. Steve reaches out, plucks it from Billy's mouth, inhales heavily, lets the nicotine course through him. He still feels that calm, but it's with a sharper edge. He's thinking of standing out in the trees. He's thinking he won't be breaking that promise, now. Won't be alone.

Steve tosses the cigarette out the window, taps his fingers in a steady rhythm on the back of Billy's hand until Billy's palm turns over and Steve can tangle their fingers together. "Yeah," he says. "I know just the place we can go."

He squeezes Billy's hand and neither of them mention Billy swiping at his face with his free hand while they're driving, the fine tremor still present in the fingers laced with Steve's.

Billy drives in silence. Steve tries to give him directions, but Billy shakes his head once, the motion tight. "I know where it is," he says.

So they drive in silence. About halfway there, Billy pulls his hand away to push his hair off his face. Steve glances out the window, drops his own hand back into his lap, figures Billy's had enough of hand holding, or whatever.

He jumps halfway out of his skin when he feels Billy nudge his arm. When Steve glances over, startled, Billy's staring through the windshield, but his hand hovers between them. Steve can't hide his grin or the way he reaches out and catches Billy's hand between both of his own. He holds it like that for the rest of the drive.

"It's a--"

"Long walk up the drive," Billy interrupts him. "I know, Harrington." He pulls over to park at the side of the road. He parks almost exactly where Steve does when he comes out this far. For some reason, it makes Steve feel safe.

Steve gets out of the car first, takes a second to stand out there at the side of the road, flanked by forest on one side and the Camaro on the other.

He feels something dark rumble underneath his skin. Steve doesn't wait for Billy. He pushes away from the Camaro and starts the fifteen minute walk past the farmer's house to where the forest begins in earnest.

"Harrington," Billy says after a while. Steve stops and turns. Billy doesn't jog to catch up, but he walks faster, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. "You've got the worst fucking case of the look-arounds I've ever seen," Billy says when he finally draws even.

"The whats?"

"The look--the lookarounds. My mom used to say that about me. I was always trying to see what was going on someplace I shouldn't."

It's the third time Billy's mentioned his mom--or, second maybe. Steve just assumed the smell of hospitals had something to do with her. He bumps their shoulders together. "You seem like you probably were a troublemaker."

"Were?" Billy asks. When Steve glances at him, Billy's almost smiling.

Steve wants to ask him more, to coax the story out of him, but then his feet touch down on half frozen grass and Steve's skin rumbles again, urging him out into the trees, something like a warning rattling around inside his skull.

When they're far enough from the treeline that everything is coated over in darkness, it's nearly impossible to see, Steve walks up to a tree and runs his fingers over the bark. It's rough under his fingertips, cold. Dry.

A clatter startles him out of his study. He looks behind him. Billy's

standing between two trees. It takes a second, but Steve realizes the clatter was Billy kicking a rock against a tree. He does it again. The sound is loud out here, enough to be grating.

“Knock it off,” Steve says, because he comes out here to listen to the sound of the forest and make sure nothing is wandering through the trees. He’s not sure if he’s more afraid the clatter will draw something in or send it away.

Billy does it again. The sound doesn’t quite echo, any real echo is muffled by trees and leaves and dirt, but it’s *loud*.

“Knock it off,” Steve says again.

Billy kicks another rock. Steve’s got his hands at Billy’s shoulders before he can stop himself. “I said stop it!” Steve snarls. He shoves at Billy’s shoulders, does it again, does it again and again and *again* until they’re backed up against a tree. They’re chest to chest, now. Billy’s hands fall on Steve’s upper arms, hold him there. “Harrington,” he says. “You’re shaking.”

Steve feels it, then.

They’re both shaking apart tonight.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “God, just stop kicking the rocks. Okay? It’s the sound.”

“What are you so afraid of?”

Steve stares at him. “Monsters,” he says.

Billy laughs, clipped, harsh. He’s still got Steve’s arms. Steve can feel the heat of his palms through the layers of his close, burning like a brand. “Tell me about it,” Billy says finally.

“How’s your side?”

“Fine. How’s your brain?”

“Fine.”

“Liar,” Billy says, almost a taunt.

It’s true--that he’s lying. Steve’s brain is still rattling with something at the edges of dangerous. In science, they’d learned about fight or flight, once. In like, eighth grade probably. He’d liked his teacher less than the kids like Mr. Clarke, but they’d learned about fight or flight in that same classroom. Steve feels like something in his brain is broken, like evolution left him behind, like he is all fight and no flight, ready to claw his way through the trees themselves if it means he’ll never again be caught off guard.

“Billy,” Steve says, halfway to begging. “Leave it alone.”

Billy sags back against the tree, but he doesn’t let go. He pulls Steve with him, until their chests are pressed together and Billy’s got his arms around Steve. Steve wants to fight it, hackles raised, edges jagged, but after a second he gives in. There’s darkness all around them, but the sound of Billy’s breath near his ear drowns out the rest of the forest, so Steve closes his eyes and sinks against Billy’s chest and they stand there, trespassing on some farmer’s land, just fucking holding themselves together, for a really long time.

~

That’s the first time Billy shows up at his house unplanned, but it isn’t the last. Over the next month and a half, things in Hawkins stay quiet, trees stay dry and tree-like. Steve keeps going out into the woods at night to wait.

He’s not alone as much. Usually Billy’s with him. Steve kind of hates it, because he goes out into the woods to be silent and alone and sometimes to shake apart on the forest floor, but now Billy is always an arm’s length away, now Billy is always ready to hold him together.

Billy doesn’t always show up with bruises or cuts. Sometimes it’s the heavy weight of his father’s words. Those nights are especially bad, even worse than the first time with the one bruise--Steve doesn’t know much about that kind of pain, the stuff Billy carries in his eyes and the tightness of his mouth. In the rasp of his voice when he starts to say *he said*, but never finishes it. Steve has no idea what Neil

Hargrove says to Billy. He only knows the aftermath.

Sometimes, too, Billy comes around because he's bored or lonely. Because Max is at the arcade with the rest of the kids and he knows they're both free. They splash each other in the blue glow of the pool--which only makes Steve feel queasy sometimes, looking at it--or play chess, which Steve is terrible at, but Billy turns out to have a knack for. Sometimes they do homework, when there are long papers to finish or books to read. Billy, Steve is realizing, is--a really good student. He's also a really good reader; he can keep Steve busy for hours with the worst fucking chapter of the dumbest fucking book they have to read for English, just with the way he reads it.

Steve will sprawl out on his bed, feet dangling over the edge, and Billy will sit against the headboard with his feet tucked under Steve's thighs, and Billy will read. Sometimes he stops to remind Steve, "You're supposed to be following *along*, Harrington. How will you ever learn to read otherwise?" but mostly he lets Steve just listen, lets him get lost in the story of it.

Steve looks at him on those nights, the sky dark outside his window, the pool glowing blue, Billy looking soft in the yellow light from his lamp and wonders what he ever fucking did without him.

~

They're driving through Hawkins when Steve's radio goes off in the back. Billy makes a low sound of displeasure from where he's mostly sleeping in Steve's passenger seat as they drive lazy loops through the town. It's a rare night that Steve gets to drive, but Billy's dad has his keys, and Billy had *walked* across town in the damp cold of an April on the verge of rain. Steve had wanted to go to bed, but Billy had been restless, and so they're driving in circles around Hawkins, the heat on high enough that Steve's nearly uncomfortable from it, and Billy's dozing.

It's one of the bad nights, when Billy won't say what's been said to him, when he seems to withdraw all the way into himself, when he's the kind of quiet that if Steve weren't holding his hand right now, he'd maybe forget that Billy is there.

The radio pings again. "Can you grab that?" Steve asks. The pinging--morse code--means it's Hopper. Hopper doesn't usually bother with radios. He likes phones better.

Billy grumbles at him, untangles their fingers, and leans around to grope for the radio in the back of the car. Steve holds a hand out for it, but Billy shakes his head, presses the button for it and holds it up for him. Steve can't help the smile at the corner of his mouth when he does it. It's fucking *sweet*.

Billy sees the smile. Flips him off. It's nice, Steve thinks absently, to see him acting like he's himself. It's been a long hour of heavy, sad silence.

"Hop?" Steve says.

"Hey, kid," Hopper's voice fills the car and Steve's on edge at once. He sounds tired.

"Everything okay? Billy's in the car with me."

He sees Billy raise his eyebrows at that. "Hey, other kid," Hopper says.

Billy doesn't say anything back.

"Listen, Steve. I need you to come down to the station."

Steve feels the deadly, cold wash of certainty go from his skull to the base of his spine. He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. "I'll be right there," he says.

"All right," Hopper says.

Billy drops the radio in the backseat. "Are you in trouble?"

We all are, Steve doesn't say. He grips the steering wheel tighter. "No. I'll take you--" Steve stops, suddenly. *Home*, he doesn't say. Can't even fathom a universe in which he'd bring Billy back to that fucking house. "Uh. With me."

Billy had drawn into himself with the words, pulled away from Steve

and stared out the window. He looks back now and nods.

They aren't far from the station, but it seems to take a million fucking years to get there. Steve can't let go of his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel, can't stop himself from feeling cold even with the heat still on high, can't think of anything beyond a low buzzing thrum that it's happening again and there's nothing he can fucking do about it.

He'd tried so hard to be ready.

"I'll be just a sec--" Steve starts to say, but Billy's climbing out of the car and walking to the door of the station. Steve has to scramble to follow.

Hopper doesn't look surprised to see them both. "My office," he says, motioning with his hand. Again, Billy moves first. Steve is jealous that he doesn't know all Hopper's going to tell them is that the world is ending again. Everything is ending again.

Steve pictures Barb who had come to his house that night not knowing she'd never leave it. He envies her that ignorance. He's spent every waking fucking second in Hawkins since that first night at the Byers's knowing he was never going to leave.

It's why he'd gone out into the woods. He'd wanted it to be on his terms, but now, once again, the monsters have the upper hand, have his heart racing and his palms sweating. Hopper shuts the door behind them and Steve sees the map tacked to his wall. Sees a red circle around what he knows is that first tree, the one Mike had optimistically said was a mistake, the one Dustin had named the Sentinel.

Dustin is almost always right.

There's a second red circle on the map, now.

"How many?" Steve asks, but it's almost inaudible his voice is so hoarse. Billy takes a step closer to him, looking confused. Steve clears his throat. "How many, Hop?"

"Just the one here," Hopper says, pointing to the Sentinel's circle.

“Three here, though,” he taps a pen on the second red circle.

Steve nods. “More?”

“One is that fluke the kid thought it was. Four? That’s--”

“Preparation,” Steve whispers.

Hopper nods. “I’m telling you first. El knows, but I’m telling you first.”

Steve nods, can’t breathe really. “Joyce?”

“My next stop,” Hopper says.

Steve shuts his eyes and stands there, feeling calm and frantic all at once, a storm somewhere deep in his chest where he thinks the parts of him that used to be a normal fucking person were, once.

He feels heat like a brand on the small of his back. When he opens his eyes, he sees Billy’s bright blue gaze on his face. “You good?” Billy asks, his voice low, just for Steve.

Steve can feel Hopper staring at them. “He knows,” is what he says to Billy, nodding at Hopper. Steve wants to step into Billy’s warmth and he *knows* Hopper knows. Knows Hopper doesn’t care. Steve moves to step closer to that warmth, but Billy drops his hand and jerks backwards, his eyes blown wide.

“What?”

“He knows--”

It’s strange to watch Billy’s face shut down so quickly. To watch that California sunshine Steve can always see in him go dark. “Chief,” Billy says, gives a tight nod. Then he’s out the door.

Steve stares after him, at the space Billy was, feels the echo of heat on his back and can’t fucking focus on that, on Hopper’s slammed shut office door. Billy can be pissed and fucking *shy* or whatever all he wants. Steve will deal with it later, will find Billy chain smoking by the car, will maybe get a mean dig or two.

“Show me where you think the next one will be,” Steve says, peering at the map, relieved to have an idea of what to do next.

Hopper points out a few locations, but as Steve studies the map he thinks *no*. He thinks that Hopper’s wrong. He thinks he has an idea. He opens his mouth, but Hopper holds up a hand. “You are,” Hopper says. “Under no circumstances to go out there looking for anything *alone*.”

Steve nods, lies right to Hopper’s face like that. “Sure.”

“Go home, kid,” Hopper says. “I’ll let you know what we find.”

Steve pushes through the door. “Listen,” he says to Billy, “I trust Hop not to--”

But he stops, because Billy’s not leaning against his car. Steve spends a few seconds spinning in circles. Goes back inside to see if it was too cold for him to wait, but he’s nowhere. He’d left.

~

Billy’s absent the next two days and Steve is actually fucking *worried* about him until Max says he’s been driving her to school and just leaving. Then he’s angry. Really fucking angry. And hurt, too, because what the *fuck*.

He doesn’t show up at Steve’s house the next few nights, doesn’t knock on his window, doesn’t turn up leaning against Steve’s car.

I’m actually done with you, Steve had said to him a month and a half ago. At least Steve had the fucking decency to *say it*. Billy just fucks off.

Steve gives up sometime during fourth period.

He has to run out to his car, his texts books over his head. The rain seems unending, actually stings where it hits him, just this side of too cold and too much. He throws himself into the driver’s seat and sits there, breathing hard, for a few long minutes.

He’s skipping school. He’s trying to pretend he doesn’t know where

he's going to go.

He'd spent all of last night in bed with every light in his bedroom on, with the curtains drawn tight against the reminder of the pool outside. He'd borrowed the books from Dustin and from Joyce, old maps of Hawkins, old prints. They're not perfect, not exactly like the map that hangs in Hopper's office, but they'd been close enough.

Steve had known since Hopper had told him about the second spot of trees where the third set of trees would show up. He's been there a million times now, that old farm, farthest from the center of town, where Billy had shown up that night. Where they had gone together, not too long ago.

Billy hasn't talked to Steve since Hopper had told them and Steve doesn't know what to do with himself, but he knows how to do *this*. He can find the second set of trees, he can come back and warn Hopper, they can call the scientists--Steve can *do something* this time. He knows he fucking can.

His tires protest on wet pavement when he skids out of the high school parking lot. He drives too fast through the center of town, that same buzzing heavy under his skin as he goes.

He's not quite there yet when he sees--something--out of the corner of his eye. Steve whips his head around to get a better look, his tires skid, he slams on his brakes, jerks the wheel, tries to get the car back under control. There's no barricade, here, between the small hill at the side of the road and the road itself, and the BMW flies down it, lands mercifully upright, doesn't hit anything. Almost like he meant to pull over, here, about a mile away from where he'd normally park, out of sight of the road.

Something about that feels right.

Steve's still looking around, trying to see whatever it was, but the wind's kicking leaves up all around him, and branches, and the rains coming down so hard it's impossible to seat out the windows. He'd seen *something*, though. He's sure of it.

There.

Steve leans forward in his seat, grip white knuckled on the steering wheel as he squints through the trees. He swallows hard when he sees it again, because he was right. Monsters aren't coming, he realizes. Monsters are *here*.

There's a walkie in the backseat. He's supposed to use it for situations like this, but the kids are all in school and Hopper had told him not to do anything like this. The demodog is gone, now, but he has a pretty good idea of where it went. If he follows it, he'll find the next set of trees.

Besides, Steve reasons, the farmer who lives here has a family. Steve will--he can't just leave the dogs out here while he runs for help. It's not--it's not right.

So Steve gets out of the car.

He's drenched almost instantly, the rain freezing cold and still stinging with intensity as it falls down. He can't hear anything but the sound of it against the roof, against the wet dirt that squelches under his feet. The world around him feels strangely muted.

Steve walks to his trunk, opens it and grabs the bat from where he keeps it stashed under an old gym bag. At the last second, he digs out a knife Hopper had given him once, just in case. He shoves it in his back pocket and spins the bat in his hand. The weight of it is familiar, soothing. Even with the rain dulling the rest of his senses, Steve can *feel* the bat in his hand.

He walks out into the trees. It's a different approach than he'd normally take. He always parks near the main drive and his sense of direction has never been the best, but he has a rough idea of where he's heading. He's going mostly on feeling, the same feeling that had called him out into the forest that first time, right after everything had seemed settled, before Billy had found him with his headlights that bright, one night out in the trees.

Steve pushes his soaking wet hair out of his face and pushes any thoughts of Billy out of his head, too. He needs to focus. There's a monster in these woods, and he's going to fucking *find it*.

Steve isn't too far from his car, he doesn't think, when he finds the first tree on this farm. It looks like death, spider webbed vines crisscrossing it black and pulsing. He shivers to see it, bends down to look at the faint light it emits, even through all this rain.

He finds the second tree a few feet away, then a third, then a fourth, and then a fifth. He frowns at the fifth tree; it looks different from the others. Something's--weird about it, but he can't place what. Steve leans the bat against it, takes the knife out of his pocket to prod it once with the blade. It almost seems to hiss, to sizzle. He does it again.

Steve flicks the knife closed and stands back up. He looks at the tree and at the others, almost in a circle around him. The rain is beating down on his head, even in the cover from the trees. He can't fucking see anything, can't hear for shit.

He's reaching for the bat when it happens.

He drops the knife to scramble for purchase when it happens.

"Shit," Steve says as the ground crumbles beneath his feet and he falls.

And falls.

And *falls*.

6. VI

Billy fights.

Whenever something happens, when there is something that he doesn't understand or needs to figure out, when he is hurt or sad or angry, Billy fights. He's done it since he was fresh from his mother's funeral, still wearing his button up--although he'd buttoned it down--and jeans.

He'd been fifteen, then. *You don't look fifteen*, people had kept telling him. So he'd decided to test it. There'd been a bar on the other side of the city, and Billy hadn't really known what he was looking for, yet. A girl, maybe, because his dad had said you could find comfort there, in a woman's warmth. He'd said that to his friend over a glass of scotch and all Billy had been able to see was the way the warmth leached out of his mother, depleted in weeks. Billy had known that he didn't *want* girls, but maybe, he'd thought--even hoped--a girl was what he'd needed.

So he'd travelled across town, dark jeans and his white shirt. Wrinkled, because his mother hadn't been around to iron. That morning, before her funeral, Billy had stood in front of his mirror and his eyes had gone red and he had shut them. He'd opened them and seen tears on his cheeks and he had been surprised that he had the energy to feel anything at all, let alone to cry. Then he'd just--stopped crying. Left himself standing there with his red eyes. His vacant chest. He'd been thinking about that, when he walked into the bar, how he couldn't *feel anything* because he didn't want to. Because it was too much.

He thinks that he started it, although Billy doesn't remember much, now. He remembers the second to last swing, the one that sent him sprawling on his back over a table, strangers jeering. He remembers feeling fifteen as he pushed himself up on shaking arms, spat blood on the floor, wiped it from his nose, said, "That all you got, motherfucker?" like he was much bigger than he was.

Later, someone would tell him that the bartender called the cops. That he might have been killed, otherwise. Billy had licked blood off

his lips in a jail cell and waited for his dad. *No charges*, the bartender had promised when he'd realized how young Billy was.

Billy's dad had been silent the whole ride home. People watch you through the windows, sometimes, when you're driving. He hadn't done anything then.

In the house, though, they were alone. He'd backhanded Billy so hard his ears had rung with it. Billy had stumbled, still tired and sore from the fight at the bar, still feeling vacant. "You need to learn to be *responsible*," his dad had said, standing over him. It wasn't the first time he'd hit Billy, but it felt different. It was the first time he'd tried to beat his values into Billy, tried to beat the parts of Billy that he didn't like out of him.

Billy hadn't stopped fighting. At school, he'd mouth off to the biggest senior, get his ass kicked. Next time, he fought better. He learned you didn't win by being quick or big, not really. You won when you were meaner, when you were willing to fuck someone up. Billy was *willing*. He couldn't handle the rest of the feelings, not his father's anger or the absence of his mother in that fucking house, but he could handle the vacancy, the fights he needed to maintain it.

"Billy," his guidance counselor had said. "You're fifteen. You have a bright future. You need to stop. Your mother--"

Billy had flipped the chair in her office, thrown it at the door, knocked everything off her desk and *yelled*.

She had looked at him from over her glasses, mouth creased in a frown. "I don't think you're going to hurt me," she'd said, her voice calm and even when he screamed at her to ask why she didn't call security.

They'd come, anyway. The woman in the office next door had called. They'd found him on the floor of her office, back against the wall, sobbing into his knees. Fifteen and *hurthurthurt*, angry because it was easier. He remembers her hand on the nape of his neck, cool. He remembers the certainty with which she'd said he wasn't going to hurt her.

It had made him *cry*, that gentleness. It was maybe the last time in his life anyone had touched him like that. He remembers thinking maybe it would be the last time, ever. Maybe that's all he was ever gonna get. A dead mom and a counselor who couldn't stop security when they dragged him off the floor and pressed his cheek against the cement wall, ground it there until it hurt.

When his dad had picked him up after and saw his red eyes he'd sneered *pussy* and when he got home--always when they got home, never where people could see him--he'd pinned Billy to the wall and slammed his head against it and then locked him in his room. He'd opened the door a few times over the next three days to sneer the things that made Billy's chest cave in, the things he can never repeat, not in his brain, and not to Harrington in the car when he asks with soft words, softer fingers.

Harrington.

Billy shuts his eyes on all that fucking remembering and curls up smaller in his bed, wishing it were a different bed, knowing it can't be. He's not angry with Harrington, that's the worst part. It's the feeling of a knife in his back that really cuts, the certainty that Harrington had told Hopper because he trusts him, because Harrington has the luxury of people to trust, and Billy doesn't. Harrington had *betrayed* him and Billy feels like he might bleed out from this wound.

Billy knows how this goes.

Hopper mentions something to one of the parents--he spends enough fucking time with them, Billy thinks, for casual conversation. Hopper mentions something to one of the parents and they mention something to Susan. It's innocuous, *nice that Billy and Steve have made up*, someone will say to her. *They've been spending so much time together*. And she will mention it over dinner because she doesn't fucking know any better. And Billy's dad will meet his eyes across the table and he will *know*.

Billy's not even worried, really, about what happens to him at that point. He's scared of it in the vacant way he's scared of everything, because it's biology to be afraid when you get hurt. What he's really

scared of, what he's terrified of, is what happens to Harrington.

So Harrington's ruined everything by telling Hopper and he doesn't know it, because panic had flashed hot down Billy's spine, had pooled in his stomach, had sent Billy spinning on his heel, walking calm and like he was angry until the police station door had shut behind him, and then he'd been running, he'd been running like he was running from something, which he *was*, but not like he was being chased, because Harrington hadn't come looking for him.

Which was good, Billy thinks, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling. Billy doesn't know what he would have said to Harrington if he had given chase.

Except Billy hasn't been to school in two days and his new guidance counselor--Billy doesn't fucking *get it* with these dumb bitches, they keep going on about *potential* and all he wants to do is break things--had called the house twice the day before and three times today. She's worried about his college applications.

"Billy," she'd said to him on the phone, the third call, when his dad had no choice but to hand it to him or risk someone at school realizing the kind of monster he was, a man who hated with no concern for who or what or why. "Do you realize how many times I have called your high school in California for accurate grades? That's a lot of late nights for me. Your essay is *beautiful* and I can't figure out why you're risking anything bad showing up if colleges look into you *by skipping school*." He hadn't said anything. "Get your ass here in the morning," she'd finished, and then she'd hung up the phone.

Billy hates her in the same way he'd hated the one in California when he was fifteen. She makes something come alive in his ribs. It might be hope, but he doesn't fucking care. He can't fucking *stand it*. Harrington had done that too, actually, when he'd touched Billy like he was something worth holding. Like Billy might be something good. It's why Billy kept going out at night into the woods with him, like in the reflection of this good man's eyes he might start to see something with some worth in himself.

It doesn't matter, though, Billy thinks. You don't find a good thing in the woods at night. Any little fucking kid could tell you that.

Billy will have to go to school when the sun rises. He will have to see Harrington. It will have to *not matter* because nothing can like that, not anymore. He shouldn't have let it matter in the first place.

There's only a few hours until sunrise. Billy falls asleep thinking of the fights he can pick at school the next day to shatter the perception of any fucking good in him, to wipe that look out of Harrington's eyes, to crush that care out of his counselor's voice.

~

Harrington isn't in school, which is irritating, but fine. Billy picks a fight anyway. Finds a kid on the basketball team who's been *running his mouth* lately about something stupid. Billy can't remember, isn't even really sure that's the right kid. He slams him up against the wall anyway, and luck is on his side because the kid fights back.

Billy's got him on the ground, is drawing his fist back for the final punch, the one that'll seal the deal--get Billy suspended maybe, expelled hopefully--when fingers close around his wrist. For a second, he's almost *hopeful*, something near his ribs breathing much more steadily than his lungs, but when he looks over his shoulder it's Tommy. It's Tommy who hauls him off the other fucking kid, Tommy who runs him out of the building when teachers finally appear.

Billy looks over his shoulder and the other kid is fucking gone, too. He had been able to run. Billy hadn't done *enough*. "Get your fucking hands off me," he snarls when Tommy doesn't let go.

"Are you fucking *insane*?" Tommy asks. "You're gonna get yourself *expelled*, you stupid asshole," and Tommy shoves his shoulders, and shoves, and shoves, and then *dodges his hit* when Billy swings. "I'm not Harrington," Tommy says, voice low. He shoves Billy until his back is against a wall. "I can take a fucking hit and I can handle a fucking fight, so pick your battles here, Billy."

Tommy's not ever going to be the king of anything, Billy thinks, kind of absently as he stares Billy down. He knows his place, though. Knows his strengths. Billy exhales heavily through his nose.

"Where is he?" he asks.

“Who?”

“*Harrington*.” Billy holds back the choice names he wants to call Tommy because he wants a fucking answer.

“I don’t know. He skipped everything after fourth period yesterday. Went home right when the storm started. I figured he was with you.”

“No,” Billy says. “We have unfinished business.” Billy tongues blood off his knuckles so Tommy gets the gist of the business. Tommy throws his hands up in the air, rolls his eyes.

“Whatever, man, just don’t get yourself expelled. All right?”

Billy doesn’t ask why Tommy cares. He shoves past him, irritated at this additional person in his life who has some stake in Billy’s future, apparently, even if it’s only for all the rides it gets him, the party invitations. Give and take, Billy knows value systems. He doesn’t know what value he’d had for Harrington, but it doesn’t matter. As soon as he comes back Billy’s going to--

--going to what? Break up with him?

Billy laughs, spits blood on the floor of the school when he walks back inside.

Jesus, what a fucking *joke*.

~

Harrington isn’t there *again* the next morning. Billy throws an elbow in gym class, gives some junior a bloody nose, gets himself benched for the rest of gym.

~

Billy’s waiting in his car, smoking, outside of the middle school at the end of the day. He tells himself it’s because he has to pick Max up, but he knows it’s because he wants to see Harrington. He can avoid Billy all he fucking wants to, but there’s no way he’s ditching the kids.

Only his car isn't there when Billy pulls up.

Three minutes before the kids usually come running out of the building, Mrs. Henderson parks in a spot out front. Billy watches her flip open a magazine. She's waiting, clearly, to pick up Dustin. Billy frowns.

He tosses his cigarette to the side after he gets out of his car. He grinds it under his heel, walks across the parking lot. He knocks lightly on her window and smiles the smile that he reserves for moms. She rolls the window down and grins back at him.

"Billy!" she says. "How nice to see you!"

"Hi, Mrs. Henderson. How are you?"

"I'm fine, dear. I'm just fine. How are you?"

"Good, good," Billy says. He smiles even wider, "Mrs. Henderson, what are you doing here picking up all these kids? Don't you have people who do that for you?"

She laughs. "You know, I thought I did, but Steve's been so busy, I think. He forgot to pick Dustin up yesterday *and* this morning! He hasn't called me back to confirm dinner tomorrow night, either. Poor lamb."

Billy's smile falters a little. "When uh," he says. "When's the last time you saw him?"

"You know," she says. "I actually think he might have gotten sick. His parents are never home, but I'm sure he stays home by himself. When he picked Dustin up the morning of that terrible storm he didn't look--well, he just looked so tired and pale. He must've gone straight home after school, though. He forgot the kids! The Chief ended up getting them all. He said he'd rather be out driving than have me go get them and have to rescue me!" Mrs. Henderson laughs.

Billy laughs with her, but it's hollow. He's thinking of what happens to people who go out into the woods alone at night.

The kids appear, then, falling over themselves as they run laughing

out of the building. Billy and Mrs. Henderson both turn, but their steps slow when they see him. Across the parking lot, Dustin meets Billy's eyes. Billy doesn't know Dustin well, but there's something on his face that he doesn't like.

"It was good talking with you, Mrs. H," Billy says, offering up another grin.

She reaches through the window and pats the back of his hand. "You too, dear. If you see our Steve, please let him know I hope he's all right and that I can bring dinner to him tomorrow if he's not up for coming over."

"Of course," Billy says. He turns to the kids. Dustin is still staring at him, but they're walking closer. Billy feels his frown deepen. "Maxine," he calls. "Let's go."

She peels away from the rest of her friends in a huff. They climb into the Camaro at the same time. Billy waits until they've pulled away from the school to ask: "Dustin said anything about Harrington, lately?"

Max glances at him. She's got a look on her face too. Billy knows Max much better than he knows Dustin. It's almost hostile, her expression, but it's a little veiled, too. Secretive. "Max?" he says.

"Dustin hasn't said anything about him," Max says.

"Don't fucking *lie* to me, Maxine!" Billy snaps, slams his palm on the steering wheel. The car rings with the silence after it. Max scoots to the side, puts some space between them. She's lying, Billy knows she is, and he wants to tell her it's all right, that he's not *angry*, that he's scared, that for the last few days he's been hurting, but now he's worried. He knows Max much better than he knows Dustin, but he can't tell her any of that. Billy shuts his eyes and exhales heavily through his nose. "Nevermind," he says. He turns the music up. "Forget I asked."

~

It's April, which means the sun's out for longer, even when it's cloudy

like this. The storm may have been a few days ago, but Hawkins hasn't shaken the weather from it. Billy hasn't been able to get warm, has been telling himself it's because of this awful, creeping cold. The kind that's wet and raw, that burrows into the spaces between his bones and doesn't let go. He's been telling himself it has nothing to do with his absence from Harrington's bed.

He's grateful for both the cloud cover and the additional light, though, when he parks around the corner from Harrington's house and shoves his hands in his pockets to protect them from the chill. There's no one out in the neighborhood. Probably they're all still at their rich people jobs. Billy still walks fast, though. He doesn't want to be stopped.

He's hoping that Mrs. Henderson is right. He's hoping that Harrington is sick and home alone, that he's going to find him curled up in bed and miserable. Billy can delay the inevitable end of all this for a Harrington who's sick. He'll push his hair back and hold his hand and it'll be *gross*, but maybe Billy will feel warm again.

Harrington's car isn't there, though. Maybe he's getting it fixed. Maybe he lent it to someone. Maybe it got stolen because he hasn't left his bed in two days. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe. Billy's pleading with every power that has ever lived in the fucking sky for one of these maybes to come true.

He creeps around the back of the house, cups his hands around a window to block the light and tries to see inside. There's not much of anything there, just darkness. When Harrington's home, Billy knows, he likes to leave the lights on. Billy chews at his lip. He needs to get inside.

He tries the door. Locked. He tries the window. Locked. He checks around potted plants for an extra key, nothing. Billy ends up back behind the house, by the pool, holding a large rock in his hand. He's going to slam it through the fucking window. He needs to get inside. Billy pulls his arm back, rolls his shoulder--

"I have a better way to get in," Dustin says behind him.

Billy narrowly misses dropping the rock on his foot in his surprise.

"You better have a fucking key," he says. When he turns around, Dustin isn't alone. There's a girl with him who Billy has never seen before. "Who the fuck is she?"

"She's my key, asshole, shut the fuck up," Dustin says.

Billy tightens his jaw. He'd thought Dustin could actually get in the house, but he's just being Dustin. Fucking stupid kids. Billy's got his rock again when he hears a click and the door slides open. Billy lets the rock fall from his fingertips and blinks at Dustin and the girl. "How--"

"I'm the key," the girl says, her eyes bright, a small smile at the corner of her mouth. Her face goes grim quickly, though. "Let's check."

She pushes past Billy into the house and Dustin follows her. Billy goes behind them, shuts the door again and looks at it for a second. He's sure it was locked, but the Harringtons are rich. Maybe they have some kind of--automatic thing. Or something. Billy doesn't know. Rich people have too much fucking money.

"Billy!" Dustin shouts from upstairs. Billy runs.

When he gets there, he understands the panic in Dustin's voice. Harrington's room is spotless, his bed is neat. It's the feeling of someplace empty.

I don't like to sleep upstairs when I'm alone in the house, Harrington had told him, once. It's too far from the door.

They've been sleeping in Harrington's bed, but then again, he hasn't been alone in the house. Billy's been there.

Billy should have *been there*.

"Harrington!" he shouts, darting back out into the hallway. He's throwing open doors--closets, bathrooms, a guest room, the master. "Harrington! This isn't fucking funny, come *on*!"

"Billy," Dustin says. Billy stops in the middle of the hallway. Dustin's staring at him again, that unreadable expression on his face.

"Where is he?" Billy says, rubbing his face. "Where the fuck is he?" Billy doesn't think he's ever been so scared in his life.

The girl comes back out into the hallway, then. Her face is--Billy doesn't have words for it, for how dark and sad she looks. "My name is--" she hesitates, "Eleven. Friends call me El. You can call me El."

Billy doesn't understand what the fuck is happening or why Dustin looks so fucking crestfallen, all of the sudden. He doesn't understand why Dustin says, "El--he's not. He can't be--"

"He is," she says, and it's quick and hard-edged. She looks like someone who gets and gives a lot of bad fucking news.

"What. Is. Going. On?" Billy says through clenched teeth. He feels on the edge of shattering. "Do you know where he is?"

"Yes," she says. Then hesitates, "Not exactly."

"Is he hurt?"

"I don't know."

Billy swallows hard. "Is he alive?"

The girl shuts her eyes and tilts her head to the side. "Yes," she says, "But we need to hurry. Do you know where he went?"

Billy growls. "We're talking in fucking circles. I don't know who you are. You just told me you know where he is!"

"I *do*," the girl says. "But I don't know where he *went*. Where does he go?" She's looking at Billy, her gaze searching, her eyes moving over his face. Billy feels--he feels *seen* in a way he hasn't really ever felt before. "Where does he go?" she repeats. "When he's keeping watch?"

"What does that mean?" Dustin says. "Keeping watch?"

"Shut up," El says, waving her hand at Dustin. "Billy. Where does he go?"

"Farms," Billy says, wondering how she knows that. "Lots of them, though. He goes to different ones."

"You know him," she says. "You know him. Where did he go, the night of the storm? He was upset. Where did he go?"

She's right, Billy realizes. He does know where Harrington went that night. "The--the farthest one. On the edge--" *of the world*, Harrington always says, "--the edge of Hawkins."

She nods. "We need supplies," she says. "Rope. We'll need rope. He fell. You have a car?"

Billy nods. She grins, but it's not really happy. "I hope you drive fast," she says, almost a whisper.

~

On the way to the farm, Dustin and Eleven fill Billy in. "When he said monsters are real," Billy says, "I didn't think he meant literally."

"You thought he meant it like you did," Dustin says. He's in the passenger's seat, but Eleven might as well be. She's leaning all the way forward, her head hovering between him and Dustin. Billy feels her eyes on the side of his face.

"My papa is a monster too," she says.

Billy has to work hard to keep his hands steady on the steering wheel. "Henderson," he says, voice tight.

"He didn't tell me," Eleven says. She taps a finger on Billy's temple. "I snooped. Sorry."

Right. Superpowers. Labs. "It's really fucking handy that you can demonstrate this shit," he says instead. "This would be really hard to believe if you didn't move things with your mind."

She and Dustin share a smile.

"Listen," Billy says, because they're nearly there. "When we get there, the two of you are going to stay in the car. You're just kids. I'm not

letting you do anything stupid. Okay?"

"We're not staying in the car," Dustin protests. "Why does everyone always try and make us stay behind!"

"I am not staying in the car," Eleven corrects. "You are. When Billy and I go you need to radio--" she pauses and makes a face, "You need to radio Jim and tell him what we're doing."

"Who?" Billy asks.

"Hopper," Dustin says. "This is his daughter."

Again, Billy has to fight to keep his hands on the steering wheel. *My papa is a monster, too.* "He fucking--he--" Billy can't even get it out. "To you?"

Both Dustin and El shake their heads rapidly. "He's not my papa," she says. "I'm--" she glances at Dustin, a question on her face.

"Adopted," Dustin says. "Anyway, I'm not going to sit in the car. I want to help."

"You're going to help by making sure we have--more help," Eleven says. "You stay in the car. I go with Billy." Billy opens his mouth to protest, "It is a compromise," she says. "You need me."

Billy can't actually argue with that.

When they get to the farm, though, Harrington's car isn't there. Billy smashes his fist against the dashboard. Dustin jumps. He'd been so *sure*.

He's got other farms, but he'd been so sure.

They're driving back down the road, away from the farm, back toward town, when Dustin screams, "Wait! Stop!" and jumps out before Billy's even really stopped the car. Dustin disappears down the embankment next to the road and Billy and Eleven follow. All three of them slide a little on damp grass and leaves, but Billy sees it right away, the BMW.

It's empty. Locked. Billy had been right, but Harrington hadn't even made it to the fucking forest. "I don't--I don't know where he'd have gone from here," Billy says, looking in every direction.

"This is good," Eleven says. "I can do it."

With a huge sigh and a lot of moaning about it, Dustin takes Billy's keys and goes back to the car. He's going to radio Hopper, and they're going to hope he's listening, and then they're going to hope, apparently, that he can be ready to help them, if they need it.

Billy takes a second as he follows a *kid* with *superpowers* through the forest to appreciate how absolutely fucking insane this plan is, how dangerous it is, how much they absolutely should not do it. But this place, the Upside Down, filled with monsters from Harrington's nightmares? There is no plan so stupid, dangerous, insane, reckless, or wrong--there is *nothing* that would make Billy leave Harrington there. Nothing.

"That's kind," Eleven says quietly. She's not looking at him, she's looking around at the forest, the trees. Billy's got the bag of supplies thrown over his shoulder.

"What?"

"That you would save him," she says. "No matter what."

Billy makes a face. "Do you always do that?"

"Only when I'm curious," she says. "You think you're bad." Billy doesn't have an answer for that. "You think you come out to these woods looking for something good," she continues. "You think that he is the something good."

"Listen--"

"I won't tell anyone," she says. "That you love him. But--" she pauses, tilts her head to the side and Billy almost trips and falls. *Love*? That's--he doesn't. He can't. "I think you coming into the woods with him is your something good," she says finally. "I think you doing that with him is good. I think you are good or learning to be. I am, too."

Billy doesn't have anything to say to that, but it doesn't matter. He doesn't need her to point it out to him, but she does anyway. The hole in the ground, the weird fucking trees. Billy understands, looking at them, what Harrington had meant when he'd said he saw a tree that looks like death, now.

He drops the bag of supplies, grabs a bandana out of it to tie around his face, grabs another and shoves it in his pocket for Harrington. Eleven's quick and she's helpful. They tie a rope around a tree that doesn't look like death. Billy tugs, testing its strength. It's as good as it's going to get, he thinks.

He knows the plan. They've talked about it. "You'll stay up here," he reminds her. "I'm going down. I'll yell if I need you, but someone has to--"

"Watch the rope," she says. She walks to the edge of the hole and peers down into it. It's big. She tosses the rope down.

For the first time, Billy notices the silence. He's been in this forest a million times and he's never heard it silent like this, no insects, no animals, just leaves and the sound of his heart beating too fast in his chest, Eleven's breathing.

Billy's skin crawls with how wrong that silence is.

"Here," Eleven says, bending down. She grabs something off the ground. "It's his. You might need it." Billy gets handed two things, then. A knife and a bat. A bat with *nails*.

"This is fucking crazy," he says.

"Yes," Eleven agrees. Billy leans the bat against his leg, shoves the knife in his back pocket, pulls on the gardening gloves that definitely belong to like, the maid or something and not Harrington's dad. He grabs the rope, tugs.

"Okay," Billy says. "I'm going down."

She nods.

Billy makes sure he has the bat. Makes sure he has the knife. He

sucks in a deep breath. He jumps.

It's a long way down.

Billy has to drop the last several feet, can't quite reach the bottom. The rope isn't long enough. He looks up at it, can't reach the end of it with his fingers stretched over his head. There's panic, then, in his stomach, the feeling of being trapped, but Eleven's up there with her superpowers and Harrington's down here. Has been for two days. Billy needs to find him.

He clicks on the flashlight and turns to look around.

The first real sense he has is of *space*. It's not the winding, low tunnels that Dustin and Eleven had described. This is like a room, like a conference hall. His flashlight doesn't illuminate enough to see the walls of it, which is--disconcerting. The smell, too, is awful, makes his stomach turn, is *wrong* like the silence in the forest above him.

Billy takes a step, then another, then another. Away from the rope, away from the girl with superpowers, toward--he hopes--Harrington.

He has to step over vines. These are like the ones on the trees, only--bigger. Thicker. There's something about them that makes Billy feel like they might be watching him. His skin crawls as he walks, still looking for a wall, still not fucking finding one.

It's silent down here, too. Like all the sound has been sucked out of the air, like sound has never existed, like Billy's been imagining it all his life.

The silence worries him. He's not sure what he's going to do if Harrington is--if Harrington is--

Then, there's a thump.

Billy spins in a circle, shining his flashlight, raising the bat. He hears it again, and again, and again. It's--a pattern, Billy realizes. Like a drumbeat.

Monsters don't have drums. He's pretty sure they don't listen to music.

“Harrington!” Billy shouts, knows it’s dangerous, doesn’t fucking care. “Harrington, where the fuck are you?”

At the sound of his voice, the thumping sound stops, suddenly. Billy spins around again, shining his flashlight, trying to find a fucking wall. “Harrington!” he screams, knows he sounds desperate. “Come on, come on, *please!*” his voice is hoarse, cracks on it. “Come on, sweetheart,” he says, a little lower, mostly to himself. “Tell me where you are.”

Thump. Then again. Billy holds still, listens as the thumping starts up again, steady, a beat. He follows it. He walks away from the rope. And walks. And walks.

Thump, thump, thump.

Billy’s not sure what he’s going to do if monsters are smart enough to lure him like this, to pull him away from the rope and Eleven. He’s got this fucking bat and a flashlight, but still--

All at once, though, his flashlight catches movement. Billy sees Harrington’s face caught in its beam.

He’s so pale, Billy thinks, struggling not to drop the flashlight as he runs. There’s dirt on his face, and blood. Harrington’s eyes are wild, afraid.

And also, Billy’s brain thinks, frantic, desperate, there’s a vine across his *fucking mouth*.

He’s pinned to the wall, that’s what Billy realizes when he’s finally there. The vines are fucking pinning him to the wall. “Okay,” Billy says, putting the flashlight down and dropping the bat. He runs his fingers over the parts of Harrington’s face he can reach, grips one side of his face near the temple. “Okay,” he says again. “You’re okay. You’re okay.” He keeps talking, not even sure what he’s saying, just touching Harrington with one hand while he grabs the knife in his other. “You gotta hold still for me, sweetheart, okay, don’t move,” he says.

Harrington’s eyes are still wide and wild. Billy feels him nod. Billy

holds him steady with that one hand, saws into the vine with the knife. It feels like it takes a hundred thousand years, but the vine finally falls away from his mouth. It wriggles, Billy thinks, when it lands. It seems to shrivel up.

Billy spares it only half a glance before he's got his mouth against Harrington's. Just for a fucking second. "I got you," he says. "I got you, okay, okay," and then he's pulling away because he needs to *cut Harrington down from the fucking wall* of the underground cavern. Cool, this is *great*. Billy's fine.

"Billy," Harrington croaks when he pulls back. He's tugging at the vines, trying to move closer. "Billy, don't--"

"I'm not going anywhere," Billy says. "I gotta get you down, okay? Easy, Harrington. I'm not going anywhere."

The vines are thick. Billy wonders, as he saws into them, if he's imagining the whisper-soft sound of screaming, or if Harrington hears it too. He doesn't want to ask.

Harrington falls forward when Billy finally frees him. Billy catches him, the knife clatters when he drops it, but Billy doesn't care because he's got Harrington in his arms. Harrington, who has been down here for two days. "Jesus," Billy mumbles, arms tight around Harrington's waist. Harrington's too limp against him. He doesn't like it. "Have you--for two days--"

"A few hours ago," Harrington says, breathing shakily. "I've been running," he says against Billy's shoulder. "It got me," he says, breathing too hard. "The tree. It got me, it got--"

"Easy," Billy says. "It didn't. *I* got you. You're okay, you're okay. We gotta move, now, sweetheart. All right?"

There's a sound like hissing, like a whisper, like a lot of things whispering. Billy can't shake the feeling that the vines are watching him, that they screamed when he cut into them. He feels something at his ankle. When he looks down, in the light of the flashlight he can see a vine, nudging at his leg like a fucking cat.

Billy swallows down panic. "We gotta move," he says again. He grabs the knife, kicks the vine, hands Harrington the flashlight. "Can you hold this?" he says. He keeps moving his feet, which is counterintuitive for him, Billy likes balance, likes a strong stance. He can't hold still, though. The whispering sound continues and the vine is nudging at his foot again.

He shifts, gets Harrington's free arm around his shoulders, gets an arm around Harrington's waist. "You didn't tell me how real monsters were," Billy says, going for funny as Harrington's head lulls against him. "You have a lot of fucking explaining to do."

Harrington doesn't quite laugh, but he makes a soft sound. "I thought I was going to die down here," he says. "I thought I was dreaming when I heard you shout my name."

"Nobody is dying down here," Billy says, half dragging Harrington, stepping desperately over vines. He's trying not to panic, but there weren't this many, at first. There's more, now. He's sure there's more.

Finally, he can see the rope.

He trips.

They go down hard, both of them too surprised and carrying too much shit to catch themselves. Billy's just glad no one got impaled on the fucking nail bat. He feels something nudging at his back, and for a second he thinks it's Harrington, but it isn't.

"Billy," Harrington says, scrambling next to him. There's a vine wrapped around his arm. Billy grabs the knife, saws into it, gets it off. Harrington snatches the knife from him and saws at one wrapping itself around Billy's other wrist. Billy grabs the bat, Harrington holds the knife. They stumble to their feet.

In the edges of the circle of light the flashlight casts, Billy can see the rope. Harrington goes to grab the flashlight. "Leave it," Billy says. "Come on."

Harrington's on his own two feet, stumbling, but with him. Billy grabs his hand and locks their fingers together. They run.

The vines whisper, nudging at their ankles as they step over them. "Eleven!" Billy shouts, staring up at the rope. "We can't reach the rope!"

He stomps on a vine, hits one next to Harrington with a bat. This is very fucking not good.

Harrington steps closer, leans against him. Billy smiles at him. "We're fine," he lies. "I got you, we're fine." Harrington slams his foot down on a vine. Billy feels something weird, then, almost like he's starting to float. The vines reach with him, tug. "No!" Billy shouts up. "*Him first!*" his feet land back on the ground. "You get *him out first!*" he yells.

Harrington turns to him, then, eyes frantic. Billy watches, fascinated, as he starts to lift. "You gotta let go of my hand, pretty boy," he says, like he isn't so fucking scared to be alone down here. "Can't take me with you."

"Billy," Harrington says, going higher, higher, higher. Billy shakes his head, rips his hand out of Harrington's grip, doesn't look away from him, whacks at vines that are grabbing at him as he goes up, up, up. "Billy!" Harrington says when he's finally almost out of the fucking hole.

"I'm fine," Billy lies again. He has to saw at a vine that's snuck around his waist. "I'm going to be right behind you." He doesn't know if that's true.

Harrington disappears over the mouth of the hole.

Billy and the vines are alone.

He spins in a circle, swinging the bat down on vines, and thinking that if he dies down here, at least it will have been fucking worth it. At least Harrington got out all right.

Then he's flying through the air, has to shake a vine nudging at him off his leg, and--

Daylight. The sun still hasn't set in Hawkins, Indiana.

Billy lands on dirt and scrambles away from the mouth of the hole, just in fucking case. He's on his feet in half a second, looking around for Eleven, for Harrington.

Eleven is standing back several feet. She's got one hand out, her fingers shaking a little bit. There's blood under her nose. Her other hand is fisted in the back of Harrington's filthy fucking jacket, holding him as he's fighting her to get to Billy.

He's been in a hole for two days, though, Billy thinks, staring at him for a second. He can't shake her grip.

"Move," Eleven says, and Billy does. He stumbles forward and catches Harrington around the waist, taking him from her. He spins them around so Harrington's got his back to the hole. He gets a hand in Harrington's hair as Harrington buries his face in Billy's neck. Billy's holding him up. They're both shaking.

Billy watches as Eleven stares into the hole and at the trees that look like death. Slowly, the trees fall. A sound like thunder booms with each one as she rips the trees up by their roots and throws them into the ground, into the hole. They go, one by one.

It doesn't take her very long at all. She slams the last one into the hole and there's that sound again, the screaming, but it isn't anything like a whisper. The hair on the back of Billy's neck stands up. He tightens his hold on Harrington.

As it swallows the last tree, the ground around the hole rumbles. It knits itself back together. Suddenly, Billy is looking where there was a hole, but now there's just forest floor. Just dirt and damp grass and crumpled leaves.

"We should go," Eleven says. "He needs help. Dustin says they're at Will's house. Hopper will meet us there."

Billy nods and shifts his grip on Harrington. "Okay," he says. "We need to move fast--" he turns around so his back is to Harrington, bends a bit at the knees. "Up you go," Billy says. Harrington jumps on his back, winds his arms around Billy's neck.

Two days ago, Billy was thinking he might fight Harrington. Now he's giving him a piggyback ride.

"Life," Eleven says as they jog through the forest, "Comes at you fast."

Harrington laughs, breath warm against his ear, and Billy laughs too, and they fucking *run* to the cars.

Dustin screams when he sees them. He throws open the door to the Camaro, helps Billy guide Harrington into it. He clambors into the back, Eleven behind him.

Billy will come back for the BMW. He's not letting Harrington out of his sight ever again.

Billy presses a kiss to Harrington's forehead, his cheeks flushing when he sees Eleven grin and Dustin make a face. "Ew," Dustin says, but when Billy climbs into the driver's side, he can't help but notice that Dustin's got a fistful of Harrington's tshirt clutched in his hand, is leaning forward in the seat, is clearly not planning on letting go anytime soon.

They don't really talk as they drive. Billy holds Harrington's hand, Dustin holds Harrington's shirt, Eleven watches it all happen. Billy meets her eyes in the rearview mirror and they're all tired mirth.

They're about two miles from the Byers's house when Harrington finally gives up and passes out.

~

Not that long ago, Billy had nearly beaten Harrington to death in the Byers's house. Now he carries him through the front door, slung over his shoulder, and drops him on the couch.

They have an audience.

The kids are all there, including Max. Billy feels hot panic crawl across his chest, but he can't do anything but stand next to Harrington, close enough to touch him. He crosses his arms and plants himself between Harrington and the room. "When exactly," he

says, looking at Max. “Were you going to tell me that you were *fighting monsters* when you said you went to the arcade?”

“When exactly,” Max says back, her arms crossed, she’s so much like him sometimes it scares him, “Were you going to tell me that you were *dating Steve*?”

They stare each other down across the room. A woman Billy catalogs dimly as Jonathan’s mother is watching them, smoking. “Hopper will be here in a few minutes,” she says. “Billy, we haven’t met yet, but my name is Joyce. I’m Will and Jonathan’s mom. I’m going to warm up some water so we can clean him up a bit. Kids, come help me in the kitchen. You can heat up some soup. I’m sure he’ll be hungry.”

The boys look reluctant. “I said *help me in the kitchen*,” Joyce says, grabbing two kids by the shoulders, cigarette hanging from her lip. She practically drags them away.

Max doesn’t move. Billy didn’t really expect her to. They’re still staring at each other. “I couldn’t really tell you,” she says finally, cracking first. “You wouldn’t have believed me.”

“I couldn’t really tell *you*,” Billy echoes. “It was--” dangerous, a secret, *dangerous* for anyone to know, especially her, especially when she could tell.

“Your dad,” she says, her voice quiet. “I get it.” Billy nods. He glances back down at Harrington, who looks a little less passed out and a little more like he’s sleeping. Billy can feel Max’s eyes on him. “I’m going to go help them in the kitchen,” she says.

When they’re finally alone, no monsters, no vines, no kids, Billy sinks down on the floor next to the couch and presses his face into one hand. The other he rests on Harrington’s chest, over his heart, feels it beat under his palm. Dimly, Billy’s aware that he’s shaking. He’s going to cry, maybe, but he doesn’t want to do it in front of the kids, can’t fathom leaving Harrington alone for a second, and so he swallows down the taste of salt and rolls his shoulders and focuses on the steady beating of Harrington’s heart.

“Billy?” Joyce says, her voice gentle. Billy looks up at her. She’s

holding a pot of water, some towels. “I don’t think we should wake him up just yet, but I’m sure he’d appreciate--”

“Yeah,” Billy says, embarrassed by the hoarseness in his voice. He stands up and takes the pot from her, the towels.

“I asked the kids to stay in the kitchen,” she says. “Give you both a little privacy.”

Billy is so grateful for her he doesn’t know what to say. “I’m going to get him some of Jonathan’s things to wear,” she says. Billy nods again, can’t really find any words. She walks away and Billy goes back to the couch.

“Hey,” he says, voice gentle. “You can stay asleep. I’m just going to sit you and and clean some of this dirt off, okay?”

He doesn’t do a perfect job of it, but Joyce brings back clothes and Billy strips Harrington out of all his gross, hole-clothes and gets him into a clean t-shirt and sweats. Joyce takes the dirty clothes away. Billy’s pretty sure she threw them out.

By the time Harrington’s dressed and as clean as he’s going to get from being scrubbed with warm towels, Hopper’s coming through the door. He stares at Harrington for a full, silent minute. “Thank you,” he says to Billy. Then, “*El*, get *out here*. You too, Dustin!”

Two guilty-looking faces pop around the corner. “We’re making soup,” Eleven says.

Hopper sighs heavily and scrubs at his face. “Fine,” he says. “I’ll come yell at you in the kitchen.”

He walks by Billy, then, but he pauses to squeeze Billy’s shoulder.

Harrington sleeps, and sleeps, and sleeps.

Billy doesn’t really blame him.

~

It’s around 11:30pm when Billy finally leaves Harrington’s side, and

he only does it because Eleven promises she's watching him, sits on the floor where Billy's been all night and takes Harrington's hand between her own. Billy nods at that.

He goes and sits on the back steps.

Joyce follows, which is good. Billy's hands are shaking too badly to light his cigarette. "It was hard for me," she says, settling next to him and lighting her own. "To wrap my head around everything after it was over." She exhales smoke at the sky, the stars have come out, the clouds are gone. It's a beautiful April night, but it's cold. Billy would like to pretend that's why he's shaking, still. "When it's happening, you know?" Joyce continues, "It's a lot of running around and screaming and being glad we're alive." She shrugs. "After, though? When you really *think* about it? That's hard."

"I should have been there," Billy says. "I was being an asshole. I wasn't even angry with him. I just *wanted* to be and I left him *alone* and I should have been there."

He can hear the anger in his own voice, knows the bite in it is because he's pushing back tears, isn't sure why he wants to cry, has never in his life felt so fucking guilty.

"It isn't your fault, honey," Joyce says. "People have feelings. You were scared. It's all right to be scared and to get mad. You couldn't have known."

"If I had been there it wouldn't have--"

"Sure," she says, easily. "And if he hadn't told Hopper--I know, by the way, we all do. We won't say anything, honey, but if he hadn't told Hopper then you wouldn't have left. It's not your fault."

Billy has to drop the cigarette. He presses his face into his hands. He doesn't know what to do with this, he thinks. He's been broken for so long. He's been fighting for so long. He's been *bad* for so long. He doesn't know what to do with her soft voice, with this mother telling him it isn't his fault when everything, *everything* has always been his fault.

Billy falls apart, then. He's sobbing into his hands before he can stop himself. It's ugly, the kind of crying he hasn't done in a long fucking time.

Joyce doesn't leave. She rests her hand, cool against his hot skin, on the nape of his neck, like his guidance counselor had in California, like his mother had when he was little. Billy sobs, and Joyce sits there, and when he lifts his head and wipes at his eyes, when there's nothing left to cry in his entire body, she passes him her cigarette and puts her arm around his shoulders.

Eventually, Billy stops shaking.

They both look up when the door opens. "Billy?" Max says, her voice soft and young. "He's awake. He's asking for you."

7. VII

Notes for the Chapter:

I had a lot of free time that I wasn't expecting and this got done way faster than I thought it would. I also realized I couldn't end the story right from a Steve chapter, so there's going to be one more after this because I have exactly 0 chill or ability to...stop myself, apparently.

Please note!!!: there is a moment in this chapter where some government people come to the house and take some photos and it is 300% an invasion of Steve's privacy and he's definitely uncomfortable during it.

Steve opens his eyes and it takes a second for everything to come into focus, so all he's aware of is the warm light of the place, a little hazy. Then he feels a weight across his chest. Steve thinks of vines and scrambles, ends up with his back against the couch cushions, half in a crouch his arms out.

Eleven is sitting on the floor rubbing her wrist. Her expression is hard to read. "I'm--" Steve says, swallowing hard. "I'm sorry." He flushes, feels it creeping down his neck, the hot wind of embarrassment over every inch of him.

Her eyes search his face. "We are at Will's," she says. "It is almost midnight. You slept for a long time."

Steve nods. "Thanks," he says, dropping down out of his awkward crouch to sit on the cushions instead. He leans forward, rests his elbows against his knees. "Where's--" he glances around the room, a quick sweep, but it's just him and Eleven in the living room. "Everyone?"

"Jim is taking Lucas and Mike home. Their parents were upset," she says. "Dustin is sleeping over. He and Will are in Will's room. Max is in the kitchen. I am right here," she smiles. "But you are really asking

about Billy. He is outside with Joyce.”

Two nights ago, Steve thinks, or three? He’s a little disoriented--but a few nights ago, anyway, he had told Hopper a secret that he hadn’t realized he should keep. He can still see it, the way Billy’s face had closed off, the quick turn on his heel. He can still feel how surprised he was when Billy wasn’t outside, when he didn’t come to school. Steve shivers and shuts his eyes for a second, thinks of the sound of rain and wind beating against the roof of his car. “Can I--” he starts, but he’s not sure how to finish it, because he isn’t sure that Billy’s going to want to see him. That’s a lot to put on a little girl. Steve takes a slow, deep breath and reminds himself that he’s survived this kind of thing before.

He’s not sure he means the heartbreak or the monsters, but whatever. He spent two days in a *hole in the ground* and he thinks he’s entitled to being dramatic in his own head.

Also, the idea of Billy never really speaking to him again *hurts*.

Also, the idea of being left alone makes his stomach drop.

“Max?” Eleven calls.

Steve looks up when she walks into the room, her face splitting into a shy smile. He remembers when she was just some random girl, the only one helping him lug shit around in a junkyard. “Hi,” he says.

“You’re awake!” She moves forward like she’s going to hug him, but stops herself at the last second and holds out a closed fist instead. He bumps his knuckles against hers. “I’m going to tell Billy,” she says quickly, turning on her heel. Again, she stops herself, falters. “I mean, if you--if you want to see him?”

Steve *does*. He wants to see him so fucking much. “Yeah, uh,” he says. “I’d--can I see him?”

“On it,” Max says with a serious nod. She’s a cloud of red hair as she spins on her heel and walks out of the room.

“Hungry?” Eleven says. “We made soup, but--” she shrugs. “There are also waffles. Those are better.”

Steve hasn't eaten anything in--honestly, he's not sure. He thinks that he should probably be hungry, but he isn't.

He's tired and he's dirty and he wants--

Footsteps, then Billy appears in the doorway. There's bruising on his cheek that Steve doesn't remember, and he wonders if it were the monsters in the hole or someone else. He looks tired, eyes rimmed in red, but he's staring at Steve from the doorway. Steve is tired and he's dirty and he feels a low thrum of fear emanating from his heart every time it beats. He looks at Billy and says, "I want to go home."

Billy, still across the room, still staring at Steve, braces himself against the wall with one hand. "Yeah," Billy says "Okay."

They stare at each other for another long, silent minute. Eleven moves to sit on the couch next to Steve and she takes his hand. "Before you go," she says. "Dustin would like to see you."

It breaks the moment, the way Steve was caught up in all that blue in Billy's eyes. He nods. "He's in--"

"Will's room," Billy says. His voice is hoarse, Steve thinks. When Steve looks at him again, Billy won't meet his gaze so Steve stops looking at him, because he doesn't want to fucking see that Billy won't look at him back.

Eleven's still holding his hand. Steve squeezes. She's frowning, her eyes searching over his face again. He watches her look back over at Billy. She finally lets go, pats his shoulder. "I'm going to pack some waffles for you," she says.

This isn't her house, Steve thinks, watching her walk through the room. She's here a lot, though, now. When Hopper works late, or when he brings her over for dinner. Also, Steve has to admit, he keeps several boxes of waffles in the freezer now, too. Just in case.

Billy's still watching him from where he's leaned up against the wall. "Billy?" Steve says.

"Go and see Dustin," Billy says quietly. He rubs a hand through his curls. They're a mess. Steve has the stupid urge to go and fix them.

“Christ,” Billy says quietly. “You good?”

No. He’s not fucking *good*. He spent two days in a *hole in the ground* and he’s hungry and dirty and exhausted and he wants a shower and he wants to stop feeling afraid and he wants Billy to just--to just look at him.

But Billy won’t look at him, even now, even when they’re talking, so Steve says, “I’m fine,” and then gets up and walks down the hallway. He’s in Jonathan’s clothes, he realizes. They fit funny. It isn’t a very long hallway, Steve knows that. He’s walked down it a hundred thousand times. Still, the living room had been cast in warm, yellow light. Billy and all his sunshine--even though he’d been ignoring Steve--had been in there.

Steve is alone in the hallway, except for the shadows, and it seems to stretch out for miles.

By the time he gets to Will’s bedroom door, he’s bracing himself with one hand on the wall. He knocks twice before he pushes it open.

Will and Dustin scramble to sit up. Steve turns to shut the door behind himself, stays with his back to the kids for a second, breathing slowly and carefully through his nose. When he turns back around they’re both staring at him. Will leans over and turns the light on, floods the room with a soft glow. The look on his face is awful in its empathy. “Hi,” Will says.

The seems to kickstart Dustin into gear. From his nest of blankets on the floor, he attempts to launch himself to his feet. He gets tangled in them, though, lands back on his ass with an, “Ow, son of a bitch,” and looks despondently up at Steve through his curls.

“Hi,” Steve says. He walks over and drops down onto the floor next to Dustin. Will slips out of the bed, lands on Steve’s other side. For a few seconds, there is a blissful sort of silence in the room. Steve pulls his knees up to his chest and wonders if it would be weird for him to sleep here tonight instead.

“Hey,” Steve whispers finally, not sure why he’s whispering because no one in the entire house is sleeping. “I’m gonna go home, I just--”

"I'll go with you," Dustin says quickly. He's trying to tug the blankets off himself before moving, this time. He's always been a quick learner.

"No," Steve says, grinning a little. "You stay here. I'm gonna be fine, buddy." He's not sure he's telling the truth. He thinks of how big and empty his parents' house is. He thinks of what it's going to be like sleeping on the couch in that huge room with all its windows and shadows.

Dustin's chewing at his lip. He holds his hand out and for a second Steve thinks it's going to be another fist bump. He's wondering who is teaching them that, but it turns into a weird high-five thing, an almost handshake. Dustin's shifting closer and then pulling away, all bouncing, nervous energy. "Dustin," Steve says after a second, "It's okay. You can hug me."

"Will said he didn't like being grabbed by people," Dustin says all in a rush, and then he's latching onto Steve with a vice grip and it should remind him of the stranglehold of vines around him, but doesn't, not at all.

Dustin's hair smells like hairspray and that's a really stupid thing to cry about, but Steve feels tears stinging at his eyes, hears the wetness in his voice when he says, "Thank you. Thank you."

Will hugs him then, too, and Steve feels safer than he has felt in two fucking days, basically being strangled to death by two eighth grade kids. Jesus, his life is so fucked up. Honestly, he'd felt Billy's fingers on his face down in that hole and that had been the moment he'd thought maybe he'd make it out alive. This hug--with the kid who saved him and the kid who's been through much fucking worse--is the first time since he woke up that Steve really understand he's out of that hole.

There's a tapping on the door and then it pushes open. The hallway is lit up behind him and Steve wonders why he didn't just turn a fucking light on to walk down it. Dustin and Will let go of him, but they don't really move away.

Steve can't stop staring at how exhausted Billy looks, the tightness in

the corners of his mouth, the slump in his posture. He's drumming his fingers against his thigh, over and over and over. Steve looks up at him, but Billy's looking somewhere to the right of Steve's head when he says, "Ready?"

His voice is rough and a little tight. Steve remembers, again, that Billy's mad at him.

"Yeah," Steve says. He disentangles himself from the boys, ruffles the hair at the top of both of their heads. "Get some sleep, losers," he says. He meets Billy at the door.

"I have your shoes," Billy says.

Steve wrinkles his nose. He'd worn those for *two days*. He doesn't--really want to put them on. "I don't--"

"You can wear the socks," Billy says quickly, his gaze cutting down to Steve's feet. "It's not too damp outside, I don't think just. Be careful."

Billy walks down the hall with him, leaves the light on until Steve's crossed into the kitchen. Steve glances back over his shoulder in time to see Billy turn the light off as he follows.

Joyce looks up at him from where she's sitting on the counter. She hops off, a cigarette in one hand, and walks across the room to give him a fierce hug. "You come back soon, honey, all right?" she says. She hugs him again, "I'm so glad you're okay."

When she lets go, El is next, another fierce hug. She hands Steve a paper bag. "Soup," she says, nose wrinkled, "And waffles." She winks. Someone is teaching her to wink and it's one of the funniest things that Steve has ever seen. He'll laugh about it later, he thinks, because he doesn't really have the energy to do it now.

There's the click of the front door opening and they all turn around. "It's Hopper," Billy says, disappearing out into the living room.

Steve doesn't follow, but he does walk closer, listening, curious.

"I need to talk to him," Hopper's saying. "Before they do--"

"Not right now you don't," Billy says back, his voice tight.

"We don't know--"

"She took care of that fucking hole. You know where the rest are. I saw just as much as he did. If you have questions--" Billy's voice breaks off for a second, Steve hears a frustrated exhale, "If your *doctors* have questions, then they talk to *me*."

"That isn't how this works, kid. I don't know that I can wrangle that."

"They talk," Billy says and Steve can tell it's through gritted teeth, "To. Me. I'm taking him home now, sir."

Steve hears Hopper sigh. "All right, kid," he says, finally. "I'll do my best. I'll come by in the morning."

"You'll come by when he's ready," Billy corrects. "And not a fucking second sooner. I'll answer any questions they've got."

"In my experience," Hopper sounds tired, too, "They show up when they show up."

"They'll see him when he's ready," Billy repeats. "That's the fucking deal."

"Yeah," Hopper says. "I hear you."

Steve knows that Joyce and El are watching him eavesdrop, but he thinks that it's not really eavesdropping when people are talking about *him*. The idea of doctors is--terrifying, actually. He remembers all the shit that Will had to go through. He wants nothing to do with any of it.

"Listen," Hopper says. "It was damn stupid, what you did. But--thank you. For getting him back. For getting them all back. For getting her back here in one piece."

Billy doesn't say anything and Steve remembers, again, that Billy's angry with him. He swallows hard and wonders if Billy regrets it, can't help the little nagging feeling that he'd really fucked up and that falling into a hole for two days doesn't fix that, ruining

someone's trust like he's starting to realize he did.

"El," Hopper calls. She appears at Steve's hip and takes his hand. They walk out together, Eleven holding on to him. Max appears then, too. "Everyone ready to go home?" Hopper asks.

Steve says, "Yes," with so much relief that Hopper's mouth quirks up at the corner.

"I can take her," Hopper says, nodding to Max. "She's on my way."

Billy looks at Max. Max looks at Billy. Steve has never seen the two of them look so much like siblings, before. For a second, he wonders if Max and Billy *also* have telepathy. They have a whole conversation without speaking. After a full thirty seconds, Max tilts her chin, Billy chews at the corner of his lip, they both turn to Hopper and nod. "That'd be good," Billy says. "Thanks." Billy reaches out and puts a hand on the top of Max's hand. "If he asks--"

"I haven't seen you," Max says. Billy nods, his mouth tight.

"I'm going to be in so much fucking trouble," he says to her. Max's face does something that looks at once like a smile and like she's sadder than she's ever been. She reaches out, hesitates, and then steps into Billy's space. It's almost a hug, Steve thinks, looking at them.

He wonders why Billy isn't going home with Max, but then, one hand on the top of Max's head, Billy turns to him and says, "All right, let's get this show on the road," and Steve realizes Billy's taking him home. He's still not really looking at Steve.

Steve wonders when the last time Billy went to his own house was. He frowns a little, tries to catch Billy's eye, wants to have his own half-telepathic conversation, but Billy just reaches out to take the bag of food from Steve's hand and then smile at Joyce. "Thanks," Billy says to her.

"Any time, honey," Joyce says. Steve wonders what he'd missed.

Billy leads him out to the Camaro, doesn't baby him, doesn't open the door for him or try and help him walk. Even on wobbling legs, Steve

is grateful for that, doesn't think he could handle it, being treated like he *can't*.

The car is--quiet.

At the Byers's house, Steve had the noise and the people. Always someone new around the corner. Dustin to hug, El to stare at, Joyce to look to in the seconds when he needed reassurance. At the edges of everything, golden and warm, he'd had Billy, too, and the idea that maybe things could be fixed. In the car, there's silence. There's darkness. Out the window he can see the trees, and Steve is thinking what a *stupid* fuck he's been, going out into the woods alone at night, *baring his throat* to the darkness, *daring* it to take him.

It had. Taken him. He doesn't really know how to think about what it had been like.

He'd been running. For two days, that's all it was. Running and stopping sometimes to sleep, curled against a patch of floor that had seemed bare of vines. Always, when he woke, there were vines there, nudging at him, stretching out like they were trying to see what it would take to keep him. The whole place had been almost silent, except for the whispering sound of the vines sliding across the floor, the only warning he ever had that they were coming.

It had been so *dark*. Just the faint light from the hole, but he never went near that. He couldn't be sure what else would learn to see him in that light. He'd crept along the walls of the cavern, running, jumping, dodging. Scrambling. There were always more vines. They were always waiting, nudging, tugging at him when they could.

Two days was a long time. He'd been up against a wall, kicking out at vines that twisted up from the floor and blocked any chance of running, of dodging. He'd kicked and punched and hit. There had been a big one, it had come off the floor, nudging up his leg, had slammed him back against the wall, off his feet.

It had only taken those few, dazed seconds after his head hit the wall for the vines to do their work. He remembers thinking, as they wound around his wrists and across his legs, that no one would even know he was missing, not yet. He hadn't made it long enough.

When people don't know that you're missing, he'd thought as the vines went tight enough to bruise, to make him cry out so that his voice echoed back at him, they don't fucking try to find you.

It had been the choked cry of pain, he thinks, that had led to the--the worst part.

He can feel it, still. The vine, smaller than the others, but still big, that had crept along the wall and traced over his jaw like fingers. He had realized a second before it happened what it was going to do, but it was too late to turn his head. He'd yelled, couldn't stop himself, panic bubbling up through him as he thrashed against the wall, yanking on the vines that held him. He thinks he'd been screaming *No!*, but it's all a little hazy. The vine had twisted over his open mouth, rough against his lips and tongue, heavy, too tight, too tight, *too tight--*

"I'm gonna throw up," Steve chokes out. Billy stops the car and Steve throws the door open, lands in the dirt and grass on the side of the road on all fours and heaves and heaves and heaves. He hasn't eaten in two days, though. There's nothing to come up. He's sweaty, stinging with it, and his muscles ache from the effort of pushing nothing up.

He tries to sit up, but nearly falls over. Billy's crouched on the ground beside him and he catches him as he tips, pulls Steve back into his lap. Steve can feel himself shaking. They're sitting on the side of the road and anyone could see them, but Steve can't bring himself to care. He collapses against Billy's chest, wiping at his mouth. "God, I'm so sorry," he can hear himself babbling. "I'm so sorry. That's disgusting. I don't know why I did that. Fuck. I'm so--"

"Stop apologizing," Billy says, voice gruff. He gets a hand under Steve's chin, tilts his face up, swipes under his eyes with his thumbs. Steve hadn't known he was crying. Billy gives him a minute, pushing his hair back out of his face, breathing calm and steady while Steve sits there, fucking useless, against him. After a while, when Steve's breathing has settled, Billy says, "You ready to get back into the car?"

Billy's rubbing his back. Steve never wants to move from this spot, where he is warm and held and there are no fucking vines, anywhere.

The trees loom dark toward the sky over Billy's shoulder, though, and they're on the side of the road. "Yeah," Steve manages. He climbs to his feet and scrambles back to the car, slams the door shut behind him and makes himself small in the passenger's seat, knees to his chest.

Billy, when he gets back in, doesn't say anything about Steve's feet being on his seat, even though it normally drives him crazy. He reaches out, rubs his knuckles along Steve's arm, and Steve can feel the heat from him. Billy's looking at the road, driving again, as he slides that hand lower and finally catches Steve's hand, locks their fingers together. Billy squeezes, not looking, eyes on the road, just holding his fucking hand. Steve shuts his eyes and tries to steady his breathing.

"We're gonna talk now," Billy says. "You're getting too lost in your head when we're silent."

"What happened while I was away?" Steve asks, trying for a joke. "I miss anything good?" He opens his eyes and turns his head to look at Billy's face, easier than eyes closed, much better than the window.

"I tried to break Nick's face open," Billy says, still looking straight ahead. "Tommy stopped me."

"Tommy...like, Tommy-Tommy?"

"Yeah." Billy laughs a little bit. "Don't know why, but it's probably a good thing. The guidance counselor would have killed me if I got expelled."

"Mrs. Williams?" Steve asks. "Why?"

Billy's chewing at his lip. He's got long eyelashes, Steve thinks. They're really fucking pretty. "I uh," he stops. "I'm waiting to hear back from a few schools."

"Colleges?"

"Yeah. My applications were good, I guess. She's optimistic about my chances."

Steve thinks about Billy leaving Hawkins and decides he doesn't want to throw up again, so he stops thinking about it. "Cool," he says.

"Anyway," Billy says quickly. "Tommy stopped me from killing him. Mrs. Henderson and I had a nice chat. Next time I'm over for dinner, I hope she makes that pie."

Next time *I'm* over for dinner, not *we're*. Steve feels the sting of that deep in his chest. "Are you trying to make me throw up again?" he asks, pretends he's talking about the pie.

"Hey," Billy says. "That pie is fucking good."

They both fall silent when Billy pulls up to his house.

Steve stares at it. It's strange to be back here when hours ago he'd been pretty sure he'd never see it again. He's never liked this house. It's too big, too empty, too *perfect*, but he finds himself glad to see it now.

But then he pictures going inside, Billy idling at the side of the road until Steve locks the door behind him. He pictures the Camaro driving away. No. No no no. Alone. "You can," Steve starts, feels the edges hysteria in his voice, feels stupid for it, can't help it. "I know you're mad at me," he says. "And you--that's okay, you can be mad at me, but can you--listen, you--you can be mad at me, okay? But I can't--can you just--I don't want you to--"

"I'm not going anywhere," Billy says. "Well," he stops. "I'm going into the house with you, but I'm not leaving, Harrington. I told you that already."

In a hole a million feet under the ground, Billy had pulled away from him while Steve was still pinned to the wall. Steve had still been thinking he was a dream, a hallucination, something that was going away, had panicked. *I'm not going anywhere*, Billy had said. *Easy, I'm not going anywhere*.

Steve nods, can't speak, all of the sudden. Billy gets out of the car, gets the bag of food, and Steve climbs out into the cool Hawkins night. The stars are out, he realizes. He can't stop staring at them.

They walk up to the house together. Billy stays close, always where Steve can see him out of the corner of his eye, but still not really looking at him. Steve's going to take what he can get.

Steve unlocks the door with a key stashed behind a fake rock. "Fuck," Billy says, sounding startled. "I almost threw a rock through your window," he says, sheepish, when Steve looks at him.

"What?"

"It was when I was hoping you were still inside the house," Billy says. "Before we were sure you were--" he stops, "Gone."

"Oh."

Steve shuts the door behind them. Locks it. Checks that it's locked. Checks again. Checks again--

"Hey," Billy says. He reaches out and curls his fingers loosely around Steve's wrist, pulls his hand away from the door. "It's locked, Harrington." He uses his other hand to try the knob. "See?" Steve nods. Billy lets go. Steve has to curl his fingers into fists to keep himself from trying to check it again. "I'm gonna put this in the fridge," Billy says. Steve trails after him, turning lights on as they go. "Unless," Billy says, when they get to the kitchen. "You want to eat?"

He should eat. "I'm not hungry," Steve says. Billy makes a face at him. "I'll eat in the morning. I just want to shower and brush my teeth."

Billy nods and shoves the bag into the nearly empty fridge. He doesn't bother to take the containers out of it, which would drive Steve's mom nuts. He grabs two bottles of water. "Drink," he says, shoving one at Steve. Steve does, downs the first in seconds, surprised how thirsty he is. Billy takes it from him and passes him the second. Steve takes a few sips of it, but sets it down on the counter.

"Shower," Steve says.

"All right," Billy answers. He grabs the bottle of water and brings it with them. They stop in Steve's room, first. Billy digs around in his dresser for a few seconds. "Can I?" he asks, motioning down at

himself and a pair of sweats, a t-shirt he's holding. Billy's clothes are filthy, Steve realizes. They've both been digging around in the dirt. Steve nods and then--turns around. He can't figure out why he does it, except that Billy's mad at him, still, and Steve doesn't want to do anything to risk him leaving. Can't bear the thought of Billy leaving.

When Billy's dressed in clean clothes, Steve grabs a change for himself and they walk down the hallway to the bathroom. It's the same bathroom that Steve had patched Billy up in what feels like a million years ago. Billy sits on the counter, swinging his legs while Steve brushes his teeth.

It's strange, being in this bathroom again. It feels different. Steve feels different, less sure of the ground under his feet, which--in all fairness--the ground had *collapsed* under him two days before.

Steve spits water and toothpaste into the sink, runs his tongue over his teeth. They feel smooth, again. Like his own mouth. He rinses his mouth out again and turns to start the shower. While the water's getting hot, he pulls off the borrowed socks. The shirt, the pants.

"Jesus," Billy says from behind him. There's an undertone of horrified in his voice. "I saw it at the Byers's, but--" he stops. "*Fuck.*"

Steve turns around, a question on his face. That's when he sees his own naked body in the mirror. He has to brace himself on the edge of the counter when he does.

He knows that they'll fade, the bruises and cuts, but for now they are a map, dark and angry, of all the places the vines had held him. He doesn't even have the energy to panic about it, just looks at the way the bruises wind over his body. He can't stop staring at the faintest bruising, just a little bit, on either side of his mouth.

"Harrington--" Billy says. "I can go wait in your--"

"Please don't leave," Steve hears himself say, sees his mouth say. He's still staring at his reflection in the mirror. Staring at his mouth forming the words. His bruised mouth. Where the vine had been.

He gets into the shower, gets soap and shampoo in his eyes because he doesn't want to close them, gets water all over the floor because he doesn't want to shut the curtain and not be able to see Billy, doesn't want to be alone.

The water at least, is warm. It washes whatever leftover dirt there is away, any fresh crusting of dried blood on his skin. He lets it beat against his skull until his legs warn him they're not long for standing.

Steve turns the water off. Billy hands him a towel and Steve dries himself off. He's shaking a little, he thinks. It's the exhaustion. Now that he's clean, he doesn't really understand how he's still standing up. He dresses mechanically, walks out of the bathroom, leaves the towel on the water soaked floor. If his mother were here she'd kill him.

She probably couldn't kill him. If the vines couldn't do it, if the demodogs couldn't do it, then probably his mother couldn't do it. He'd almost died. Again. He'd almost. He'd almost died.

Steve doesn't notice he's stopped moving until Billy bumps into him. They're in the middle of the hallway. Every light in the house is on, maybe. Billy's standing behind him, but steps closer, wraps his arms around Steve's waist and pulls Steve back into his chest. Steve knows he's shaking, now, can feel himself trembling in Billy's arms. "Fuck," he says. "I'm sorry, Billy. I'm sorry. I'm sor--"

"Easy, sweetheart," Billy murmurs. "Don't be sorry. I've got you." It's the same thing he'd said in the hole. "I've got you. C'mon, let's go to bed."

They walk like that, Steve against Billy's chest, and it's awkward because he's taller than Billy, and it's awkward because people aren't meant to move like that, to shuffle along barefoot and still a little damp from the shower, but they manage it.

Billy leaves the lights on and Steve crawls into bed first. He makes himself as small as he can get, but then Billy's sliding in behind him, and Steve can turn and push his face against Billy's throat, and Billy tangles their legs together and pulls him in tight. And they aren't-- nothing is better, yet. Billy is still mad at him. He's still talking at

Steve, more than to him, but Steve can deal with that for now if he gets this, the safety and warmth of Billy wrapped around him. They're going to have to talk about it, Steve knows, but they don't have to talk about it *now*.

He feels Billy kiss the top of his head. "Sleep, Harrington," he hears Billy murmur. "I got you. You're all right."

Steve sleeps. He--thankfully, he's so fucking thankful about it--doesn't dream.

~

Billy is still sleeping, snoring faintly, when Steve wakes up. Not--it's not annoying, the snoring, and it's not what woke Steve up. It's more like these little breathy sounds. Steve has slept with Billy a lot lately, and those snores--those are his favorite part, because he only does it when he's really relaxed, really asleep.

Billy's curled around him, head above Steve's on the pillows, an arm thrown across Steve's back. It should remind him of vines, but it doesn't because it's a warm weight and a familiar one. Steve doesn't think he could ever in his life mistake this for a threat. Billy's face looks soft in sleep. Steve lifts his hand, traces the line of his jaw.

Billy shifts, blinks awake. "Time's'it?" he mumbles, rolling onto his back to stretch. Steve doesn't know. He thinks it's early, though. The light outside his window looks blue, still, like the sun is only just starting to think about rising. "Fuck," Billy says, scrubbing his face when he looks at the clock. He yawns.

Steve realizes then, that Billy probably hadn't slept at all while Steve did, at the Byers's house. He shouldn't have woken Billy up. "Sorry," he says.

Billy rolls onto his side, looking at Steve. He's looking at him, at least. He says, "What?"

"For waking you up. Go back to sleep."

"Are *you* gonna go back to sleep?"

Steve thinks about it for a second. He doesn't feel tired. "No," he says.

"Then I'm up." Billy sits up in bed, runs his hands through his hair. It's standing up at weird angles and he's trying to pat it down. Steve rolls onto his back and looks up at him, snorts when Billy manages to make it worse.

"You need a shower," he says.

"Yeah," Billy answers. He ducks his head and sniffs himself. "Ugh. I smell like creepy underground hole. Sorry."

"S'okay," Steve says.

"I'm going to shower. Do you want to--"

Steve doesn't really want to be alone, but he also doesn't want to be needy. "Go," he says. "I'll be fine."

Billy nods and climbs out of bed. They're going to go through all of Steve's clean laundry at this rate, Steve thinks, as he watches Billy grab another change of clothes.

Steve sits alone in his bedroom with the light on. He counts sixty Mississippis in his head four times before the creeping fear along every inch of his skin is too much. He scrambles out of bed, down the hall, and to the bathroom. He knocks twice on the door before he steps inside. "Sorry," he says. "I just want to brush my teeth."

"Okay," Billy says from behind the curtain.

He takes his time. Billy doesn't say anything to him, but honestly, Steve's thinking there's only so long he can reasonably continue to brush his teeth for before it gets stupid. He rinses out his mouth and bites his lip.

"Harrington," Billy says, pulling the shower curtain back. "Just get in here."

Steve feels his cheeks heat, but he still strips off his clothes and gets into the shower. He brushes up against Billy, all warm, wet skin.

Steve wants every fucking inch of him. "You don't have to do this," Steve mumbles.

"What are you talking about?" Billy has shampoo dripping down the side of his face. It's kind of funny.

This is probably a conversation they should have had before they got in the shower together, Steve thinks. "You're pissed at me."

"What?"

Billy's really going to make him spell it out? "It's why you left that night," Steve says. "I fucked up. I know I did. I told Hopper and I shouldn't have. I'm sorry, but you're angry with me and you don't have to--you don't have to be here just because you feel bad for me." Steve has to look away from him, then, because he's afraid he's going to drown in Billy's eyes.

Billy sucks in a sharp breath. He's got both hands on Steve's face before Steve even registers he's moving. He jumps a little. "Shit," Billy says, drops one hand to Steve's shoulder. "Sorry. Sorry. I didn't--I moved too fast." Billy chews at his lip. "I was never mad at you," he says, voice quiet. "I wanted to be, but I wasn't. I'm not--I'm not angry at you. Jesus," Billy looks like he wants to look away, but he doesn't, he holds Steve's eyes.

"I was--I am--scared, okay? Fuck. I'm scared. If Hopper knows," Billy says softly, "Then everyone knows." Billy stops. "Well, I guess they all fucking know anyway, now. But--Listen. You know--about my dad, but Harrington. Harrington, I don't think you *get it*."

Steve doesn't get it. He doesn't understand what Billy's saying. "Billy--"

"If my dad finds out," Billy says, "I mean, it's bad for me, but it's bad for me anyway. I just--he might--you--" Billy stops talking and swallows hard, his hands don't leave Steve's skin. The room is filled with the sound of the shower running.

Steve gets it, then. "You're scared your dad is going to hurt *me*?" Steve asks, stepping a little more into Billy's space. "Hey," he says. "Is

that it?”

Billy does look away, then. He drops his hands from Steve's skin and rubs them over his face. "I can't ask you to keep doing this when it puts you in danger," he says, finally, and it is the smallest that Steve's ever heard him sound. "It was stupid. I was stupid. So we have to stop."

"Billy," Steve says. "This sounds a whole lot like we're breaking up because we--we each think it's what the *other* one needs? What the fuck? That's--that's so fucking stupid. I don't want to stop. Do you?" Billy still won't look at him. Billy's hands curl into fists at his sides. "Billy," Steve says. "Do you? Want to stop?"

"No," Billy says, voice tight.

"I survived," Steve says, "Two days in a fucking hellhole in the ground. You saved me. Monsters--like, the kind with teeth--are real." He hesitates, "Your dad is--he's a *monster*, Billy, but I'm not--I'm not scared of him."

Billy shuts his eyes. "I fucking *am*, Harrington."

"Then we keep it a secret," Steve says. He crowds up into Billy's space. The bathroom is warm, their skin is wet, Steve has never felt more urgent about anything in his life. "Then we keep it a secret until you get into one of those fancy colleges and we leave, Billy. We just. We leave."

"They all know--"

"They won't tell," Steve says, his voice fierce. "Fuck, I promise, Billy. No one is going to know. You're scared. Okay, I am too, but--monsters are real," Steve says, then echoes Billy from all those weeks before, "Please don't be done with me."

Billy opens his eyes. They are so fucking blue. Steve could drown in them, maybe. "Okay," he says.

"Yeah?"

“Okay,” Billy says. He closes the distance between them, then, and Steve ducks his head, meets him halfway. He opens his mouth so that Billy can lick past the part in his lips, and Billy’s tongue is warm, it tastes like toothpaste and like *Billy*. It feels nothing like a vine. Steve makes a quiet, desperate sound into Billy’s mouth, lets Billy kiss all the fucking monster right out of him until he’s pressing closer, dropping his hand between them to wrap his fingers around Billy. They’re both hard. Steve is surprised to realize how long it’s been since they’ve done anything other than--sleep together, in the very traditional sense of the word.

“Fuck,” Billy hisses, breaking the kiss to put his head back against the wall. “Harrington--”

“Shut up,” Steve mumbles. He presses open mouthed kisses along Billy’s throat, traces drops of water off his skin with his tongue.

Billy groans, his hips stuttering into Steve’s hand, and Steve laughs against the skin of his neck. He lifts his head again, kisses Billy while Billy’s fingers scrabble for purchase against Steve’s wet skin. Billy’s hand slides down Steve’s stomach, across his hip. Steve’s whole body goes taut with anticipation until finally, finally, Billy closes his hand around him. “Billy,” he says, a gasp against Billy’s mouth.

Steve bucks into Billy’s hand, twisting his own wrist to coax more of those quiet, easy moans from Billy’s lips. “Come on, sweetheart,” Billy says, “Come on.”

Steve feels heat in his belly, feels Billy’s hips stutter and hears his head hit the shower wall as he presses it back. Steve strokes Billy through it, presses his face into Billy’s throat to muffle his own sounds as he comes apart in Billy’s hand.

They’re both panting, Steve plastered to Billy’s skin as the water runs hot over them. Steve exhales slowly, pulls himself away from Billy’s skin reluctantly. Billy’s grinning at him, blue eyes bright, cheeks flushed. “If we had done that at my house,” Billy says, darting forward to press a soft kiss against Steve’s mouth. “The water would have gone cold like, fifteen minutes ago.” Steve laughs, can’t help it. He squirts soap at Billy and they rinse off. When they finally step out of the shower, the mirror is steamed over, fog everywhere. “Your

water bill,” Billy says, “Is going to be unreal.”

Steve shrugs. His dad deals with that kind of thing. He’s looking at their blurry reflections in the mirror, the way their bodies look standing next to each other, the way they seem to lean into each other, even without trying.

Steve’s stomach growls. Loudly. It goes a long way toward ruining the fucking moment. Billy leans over and bites at Steve’s shoulder. “We need to feed you,” Billy says. “Come on.”

They’re dressed and in the kitchen, eating fucking bowls of soup that the kids made. It’s not even eight in the morning yet. Soup and coffee, Steve thinks, is a nasty fucking combination. He puts a waffle in the toaster for balance. Then he’s on his second bowl. “Don’t eat too fast,” Billy says quickly. “You’ll make yourself sick.” Steve glances at him, a question on his face. “I’ve gone a few days without eating before,” Billy says in answer, and he’s going for nonchalant, but Steve’s fingers still tighten around his spoon. “It’s not a big deal, Harrington,” he says in response to the look on Steve’s face. “I’m just saying, the throwing up after is a bad look.”

Steve opens his mouth to reply when the doorbell rings. They both go still. It rings again, followed by a knock. Billy’s face goes from warm and open to hard edged so fast Steve’s going to have whiplash. “Who--”

“Don’t fucking move,” Billy growls. He’s shoving back from the counter. “Fucking *vultures*. You stay and eat, okay? Take it slow.” As he walks by Steve he leans over and presses a warm kiss to his forehead.

Billy comes back a few minutes later, expression like thunder, arms crossed. Hopper’s with him. Three people in suits that Steve doesn’t know trail behind them both.

Steve puts his spoon down and stands up straighter. Billy plants himself right next to him, his arms still crossed. “Mr. Harrington,” says a woman toward the front. “We’d like to talk with you.”

“You have fifteen fucking minutes,” Billy cuts in.

The woman flicks her eyes to him for a moment. "We'd like to talk to you alone," she corrects.

"Not. Fucking. Happening," Billy says instantly. Steve--agrees.

He shifts his weight. "I'll answer any questions you have," Steve says. "But Hopper stays." He pauses, glances at Billy. "And he stays, too. That's the deal."

They could probably make him talk, Steve thinks as he stares at what he assumes are some sort of government agents. They could definitely make him talk, but he doesn't want to be alone with them, with anyone who has anything to do with--all of this. He feels a little in over his head and Hopper at least knows what he's doing. Billy just makes Steve feel safe.

"Mr. Harrington--"

"That," Steve repeats. "Is the deal." He makes his voice hard, like someone who has fought monsters and won, because he has. He can wilt later. He can be afraid later. He has Billy here and he has Hopper here and Steve is--he's surprised to realize that he isn't really afraid.

They move to the living room. Steve sits on the couch, hands in his lap, back ramrod straight. It's how his father had taught him to sit. Hopper stands leaning against the wall, his arms crossed. He's listening, Steve knows. He's watching. Will has talked a lot about the way Hopper had made him feel safe in doctor's offices, in labs. Hopper stands in the corner and Steve thinks that he could say end it, and Hopper would make sure it ended.

Billy sits next to him on the couch, slouched back with his arms crossed over his chest, his legs spread, their knees touching. Steve sees the woman notice, but she doesn't comment. The government people all sit in the fancy chairs across the coffee table.

"We need you to tell us exactly what happened, Mr. Harrington," the woman says, because she is apparently the only one who speaks.

So Steve does. He tells them about the trees, about the demodog, about the way the ground had crumbled beneath his feet. He tells

them about the vines and their whispers--Billy interjects something about them screaming, then--and he tells them above how alive they were. He tells them about Billy saving him, about getting out. Billy describes what happened with the trees and--after a glance at Hopper and a nod--explains El's role in closing the hole.

Steve's voice doesn't shake. He's grateful for that.

At the end, they ask--no, they *tell him they're going to*--photograph his bruises.

Steve's mouth opens, but no sound comes out. "We insist," the woman says. Steve still can't say anything.

"No fucking way," Billy snarls, on his feet in a second, standing in front of Steve. "Get the fuck back," he adds, when one of the men steps forward.

"It's important," the woman says, primly. Billy bares his teeth in a mean smile. "You can shove that right--"

Steve feels himself stand up. "It's," he says. "It's fine."

It's the woman and one of the men who go with him. There's a brief debate about where in the house they can go so that Steve can take off his clothes and they can photograph it. If Steve thinks too hard about that, he's going to freak the fuck out. He finally brings them to his dad's office. He's almost never in here, but his dad keeps the curtains drawn over the windows. There's no mirror--Steve doesn't have to see himself.

At the door, Steve hesitates. He catches Billy's gaze and tips his head toward the room. Billy nods, shoulders his way confidently past two government agents and they walk into the room together. "I'm going to stay with our friend, here," Hopper says, leaning against the wall outside the door and eyeing the agent who had said he wouldn't come in. "Make sure he doesn't get lost in this big, nice house of yours, kid."

Steve nods. Billy's shoulder presses up against his for a second and then Steve's stepping back to tug at his shirt, pull it off over his head.

The woman can't quite hide her sharp breath at the first glimpse she gets of the bruising. Steve sets his jaw and meets Billy's eyes. "Funny, isn't it," Steve says. "The damage you people caused this little fucking town." He's angry, then, that this is how he's spending his first sunny day out of a hole, that there's a woman telling him how to stand and where to put his arms so she can photograph what monsters did when she and her people weren't paying attention.

"That's enough," Steve says after a few minutes. "You've got them all." He grabs his shirt and pulls it back on before the woman can protest. Billy's at his shoulder, then. Steve stands up straight and meets the woman's gaze. "Get the fuck out of my house," Steve says.

Billy, Hopper, and Steve show them to the door. Steve slams it shut behind them and locks it.

"I'm sorry," Hopper says, and he sounds it, looks it. "I didn't want them to just barge in. I didn't know they'd want the photos."

"Not your fault," Steve says. It has been a long fucking three days. "Thanks, Hop," he adds. "For being there. I--" *needed you* "Appreciate it."

Hopper's face is tight. "I'll keep them away from now on," he says. "They've got enough. Or they should, at any rate. They're going to take the lead on making sure nothing else comes through, they said, but I'll be keeping a closer eye on things."

Steve nods. He doesn't know what else to say. "Okay," he says. "Thanks, Hop."

"Take a few days to rest up, kid," Hopper says, voice gruff, but warm. "Let's talk when you're ready. If you need anything--call me first." Hopper pauses, glances at Billy. "Second," he corrects. Steve gets to watch Billy's cheeks tinge pink.

Steve nods again and then Hopper leaves and it's just Steve and Billy, standing there, looking at each other. "Maybe a dumb time to mention this," Billy says. "But Mrs. Henderson invited us over for dinner tonight."

Steve laughs. "Tell her fuck yes," he says. Then stops, horrified when Billy's eyes light up and he starts walking *very fast* toward the phone. "Oh my god, please don't say that to her, Billy, wait--" and Steve has to run to catch up with him, to push Billy against the wall and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him until he promises not to say that to Mrs. Henderson.

Steve makes the phone call, in the end. He doesn't trust the smirk on Billy's face when he finally starts to dial.

~

They're going to be late to dinner, that's what Billy keeps telling him. Steve's standing in the bathroom upstairs, fixing his shirt, fixing his hair. "Sweetheart," Billy says from where he's sitting on the counter. "We are going to be *late*."

Billy doesn't like being late to things. It had been something that surprised Steve about him. Billy had struck him as an *I get there when I get there* type, but he likes to be on time.

They've spent most of the day doing absolutely fucking nothing. They've watched four movies. They went swimming. They'd stretched out in the sun by the pool even though it's still a little too April-chilly to do it and had a lot of cups of coffee. Steve feels better for the ease of the day, for the food he's eaten, for the fact that he's fully hydrated again. He feels better because Billy's been close all day, but thoughtful about it. Steve doesn't feel like he's being babied or suffocated, he feels like his--boyfriend? Boyfriend--is spending the day with him.

Also, they're both dealing with the traumatic events of the last few days, but Steve is focusing very intently on the nice, *romantic* day they've had.

"I can't get my hair right," Steve grouses, pushing at it and grabbing for a can of hairspray.

It's not really his hair that's the problem. It's the bruising around his mouth. He can't fucking stand looking at it, can't do enough with his hair to distract from it. Every time he looks at it he thinks about that

stupid goddamn vine, about the way it felt to not even be able to scream in that hole.

“If you put any more spray in your hair,” Billy says, coming up behind Steve and pressing a kiss to his temple. “I’m going to have to smoke with a ten foot radius to avoid combustion.” Billy meets Steve’s gaze in the mirror, settles his hands on his hips. One day, Steve thinks, probably isn’t enough time for either of them to heal. He just wishes it were.

“Okay,” Steve says. “But only because I don’t want to set Mrs. Henderson’s house on fire.”

The initial plan, Steve thinks a little grumpily as he settles into Billy’s passenger seat, involved them going and picking his car up from the Byers’s house first, but they’re late now, so it’ll have to wait. They’d lost track of time, with the movies and the laundry--Billy’s dressed in his own clothes again and looks happier for it--and the general sense of doing whatever the fuck they wanted all day. Steve wishes he’d made time to get his car, though. He misses it.

They both trip over themselves in the scramble to cross the lawn and get to the front door, only ten minutes behind schedule. Billy’s laughing, one hand braced on the small of Steve’s back, and it’s honestly one of the most beautiful things that Steve has ever fucking seen.

The door opens before Steve can try the knob. “Steve!” Mrs. Henderson exclaims, her face stretched in warm delight. “Dear, I was so worried! Where have you *been*?”

Steve steps into her hug. She smells like a mom, he thinks. Not his mom, but maybe the idea of one, all perfume and cooking smells and a little bit of cat. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I was sick.”

It’s the cover story they’ve all agreed on. “Well,” she says, stepping back and smoothing down the hair he’s spent the last hour trying to get right. “I’m so glad you have Billy here to take care of you.”

Steve grins, glances at Billy. “Me too,” he says, honestly, and Billy flushes pink for the second time that day.

“And you,” she says, smiling at Billy, “It’s so good to see you, too.” He looks startled when she steps forward and pulls him into a hug as well.

When they get to the table, it’s Impossible Cheeseburger Pie again. Billy’s eyes light up and Mrs. Henderson doesn’t try to hide her smile. “I thought you might like it,” she says. “I’m sure it isn’t as good as your mother’s, but it’s a nice dish.”

“It’s--it’s really great, Mrs. H,” Billy says. “Thank you.” He sounds so sincere when he says it. Steve grabs his hand under the table, squeezes.

“So, Billy,” Dustin says once they all have a piece and have complimented his mom’s cooking. Steve braces himself for some sort of weird, digging comment, for Dustin’s continued disbelief that Billy had a mom. Instead, he says, “I want to go see the new movie. The one about--”

“Yeah,” Billy says, swallowing his mouthful of food. “That one looks great.”

“Want to come with me?” Dustin asks.

Steve nearly spits out his water.

Billy’s eyes are wide in his face. “Uh,” he says. “Sure thing, kid.”

Dustin beams.

They’re eating dessert, Mrs. Henderson had insisted they stay for it, all sitting around the table. Steve isn’t complaining. Billy isn’t either. In fact, when Mrs. Henderson is distracted, Steve catches Billy licking the last of the whipped cream off his plate. The third time he does it, Billy meets Steve’s gaze over his plate as he swipes his tongue along it. Steve swallows hard. Dustin knocks over his glass of water, “Ugh!” he shouts.

Mrs. Henderson looks up from the kitten on her lap, eyebrows raised at her son, but she doesn’t comment. “Would either of you boys like another cup of coffee?” she asks. Then, “Not you, Dusty.”

Billy's smile dims at the edges. "No, but thank you, Mrs. H," Billy says. He glances at Steve. "I should probably head home," he says quietly. "It's been a while since I've been and my dad, uh, he'll be looking for me."

It's a very normal sentence, but Steve and Dustin stop moving when they hear it. Steve stops breathing. Billy's eyes are on his plate now. Steve does some mental math to figure out how long it's been since Billy was home. Under the table, he reaches for Billy's knee. Billy's shoulders stay wound tight. He shifts away from the press of Steve's fingers.

"I think," Mrs. Henderson says, "You should have a little more coffee." She refills both their mugs and sits back down in her seat. She's got her elbows on the table, a mug in her hand, the kitten poking its head up curiously from her lap, sniffing at the whipped cream on her plate when she says, her voice very casual, "You know, Billy, I had a boyfriend who used to smack me around. If you'd like to talk, I'll listen."

This time, Steve does spit out his water.

"What?!" Dustin yelps, eyes blown wide in his face.

Billy's fork clatters to the table. His eyes are huge in his head. "What--"

"Dusty, don't shout at the table," she scolds, but her eyes are on Billy's face. "I know what it looks like," she says. "That's a lot for one young man to deal with. I don't doubt our Steve is a good--" here she pauses, voice thoughtful, "friend to you, but dear, sometimes it does help to involve adults. I know teenagers feel grown up, but you're just a kid." She shrugs, takes a sip from her coffee. "My door," she finishes. "Is always open. Let me pack you up a tupperware, at least."

Billy stares at her. He picks up his fork. "Uh," he says. "Thank you."

After they hug goodbye, after Dustin and Billy have made plans to go to the movies, after Steve has threatened the kitten and Billy has fed it too many things it probably shouldn't eat, Steve and Billy are standing against the Camaro, smoking cigarettes while Dustin stares

at them through the window of his house and they both pretend they don't see him.

"My mom died when I was fifteen," Billy says. "I was pretty sure I was never going to have anything good again." He shrugs. "But then there you were." He looks over his shoulder at the house, "And there's Mrs. H, and Joyce and--" Billy shrugs. "I don't know, Harrington. I wasn't expecting any of this. I ruin shit."

Steve reaches for him, rests his fingers against Billy's wrist, doesn't really hold his hand. "You're not going to ruin anything," he murmurs. He finishes the cigarette and drops it, grinds it under his heel, wishes he hadn't finished it so fast, because Billy's right and he does need to go home, but that means Steve is going to be alone and he's not *ready*. It also means Billy's going home to his dad and Steve--doesn't fucking want him to.

"C'mon," Billy says.

They both get in the car. They're around the corner when Billy reaches out and grabs his hand. It takes Steve a few minutes to figure out they're going the wrong way. "Where--"

"You're going to sleep at Will's tonight," Billy says. "Jonathan's away and Joyce has to get up early for work. She'll really appreciate having someone around to make the kids breakfast in the morning."

"Kids?"

"El will be there, too," Billy says, like he hasn't orchestrated an entire plan to make sure Steve isn't alone tonight, to give him an out so he doesn't have to feel embarrassed about it.

"Thanks," Steve says softly. They're almost to the Byers's house when he says, "Are you going to be okay?"

Billy shrugs. "I always am," he says. "I'll be back bothering you before you know it."

Steve's terrified of his monsters. He'd gone out into those woods to face them, but he'd fallen down into that hole and honestly--he thinks he'd never really thought he would find them again. Billy's going

home to his in a few minutes. Billy knows exactly what he's going to find when he gets there.

Monsters are real, Steve thinks, and Dustin was fucking *right*. It's *not fair*.

They kiss goodbye against the Camaro, because Billy doesn't want to get caught up in a conversation. Steve cups his face in both hands and presses their foreheads together.

Billy doesn't pull away until Steve is all the way inside the house. Steve watches his car disappear through the window, Joyce's hand warm on his shoulder.

"Come on, honey," she says when he's still staring, wishing he could keep Billy from his monsters the way Billy keeps him from his own. "Let's get the couch made up for you."

8. VIII

Billy parks in front of the house and spends a few seconds staring at his hands on the steering wheel. All the lights are on inside. They've probably just finished dinner. His dad likes a predictable schedule. Dinner at seven, time to linger at the table before his shows are on at nine. He likes, Billy knows, for his son to be home on time for those particular activities, to contribute to the picture of a perfect family, even though in that house it's such a fucking joke.

Going inside, Billy is trying to tell himself, will not be worse than jumping into a hole in the ground. Except that it will be, because he wasn't scared like this, to go in after Harrington. That felt like a choice, like he was doing something that *mattered*. Billy looks up at his father's house and knows this is an inevitability. Knows that this is something outside of his control. Knowing that makes it worse.

He turns off the Camaro and shoves his keys in his pocket--if his dad doesn't see them then he sometimes forgets to take them--and walks up the crumbling steps and through the front door.

Susan is standing in the first room when he walks in. Billy hesitates at the expression on her face. She's always too slow to really smooth it over, so he sees everything: surprise, worry, fear. Always the same order. He's standing next to the stupid fucking jar of seashells and the door clicks shut behind him, too loud. He winces as the sound travels through the house.

"Billy," Susan says. She's standing next to the tv. "You missed dinner." Billy fucking knows that. It's after eight thirty. "I can make you a plate." Nobody's making him a fucking plate. He's not stupid and, he thinks, she should probably stop pretending that she is.

Billy hears Max somewhere else in the house. His fingers curl into fists at his sides.

"Susan?" his dad asks, and then he appears, framed against bookshelves and a few boxes they still haven't gotten around to unpacking. Billy watches the quick, tight flash of anger that settles into the corners of his father's mouth when he sees him.

"Hi, dad," Billy says, because what else is he going to say?

"I was just telling Billy that he missed dinner," Susan says, voice too quick, too quiet, her eyes on his father's face. She's got nervous hands. She's moving them too much. Billy stares at her as she says, "But I can make him a plate."

"That's very nice of you, Susan," his dad says. "But Billy can't accept that, because he knows what time we eat dinner and he made the *choice*," that last word rings out, clipped at the end, halfway to a yell, the start of a raised voice, "to miss it. Didn't you, Billy?"

Billy's fingers go tight at his sides. This fucking farce of parenting makes his skin crawl. "Yes," he says. "I'm sorry, Susan," he parrots before his dad can tell him to say it.

"Where have you been, Billy?" his dad asks. "It's been a few days. I almost called the police."

"Why?" Billy asks, "Were you *worried* about me?"

He can't stop himself, sometimes. He registers Susan's flinch before he really registers his dad moving, but then it's just Billy, crushed against the wall, his father too close to his face, pinned there by an arm against his chest, a hand on his throat. Billy makes his body very still, drains the tension from it and looks at his father's ear. "You watch your mouth in this house," his dad says, voice low. "And you *answer* my questions when I ask them. Do you understand me?"

Billy glances into his dad's eyes, then ducks his gaze. "Yes, sir," he says.

"And?" his father's fingertips dig into his throat. Billy swallows against them. The pressure doesn't loosen.

"I was with some girl," Billy says. "Her parents were out of town. We got distracted."

Or else his father had said once, pinning Billy to a wall just like this one in a state with considerably more sunshine. Billy can see that fucking jar of seashells out of the corner of his eye. He imagines smashing it over his father's head. Billy leans into the lie about a girl.

Hopes his dad doesn't ask for a name.

He can feel his father's eyes on his face. Billy waits for whatever is coming next.

"Mom?" he hears, then footsteps. "I need help with my science. Can I call Dus--" Max stops talking suddenly. Billy doesn't have to see her to know the way her eyes go wide as she takes in this fucking family drama unfolding against the wall. His father's fingers are still tight against his throat and Billy's pushing down the urge to fight back, to stay still and loose against that pressure. It's not fucking easy.

"You," his dad says, his voice so low and angry and just for Billy's ears, "Go to your room." The threat comes next, after a beat, after the fingers tighten again. Billy squirms against the wall, can't help it, curls his fingers into fists to keep them at his sides. His father's face goes tighter at the movement. Billy can feel his breath on his face. "I'll will," his dad says, slowly, so fucking slowly, "Deal with you later."

The fingers on his throat dig in again, too tight just for a second, hard enough to hurt, to make Billy panic, and then his dad lets him go. Billy pushes off the wall, walks past Max with his eyes on the floor because he can't look at her. His cheeks are hot, humiliation and a little bit of fear that stings, sweat at his temples.

He's almost through the second room, where he can go down the hall and shut his door behind him, when his dad says, "Billy?"

Billy stops moving. "Yes, sir?" he says, turning around. He can see Max watching him. He doesn't look at her.

"Give me your keys."

Billy clenches his hands into fists then unfurls each finger. He shoves his hand in his pocket and takes his keys out, but his dad doesn't move. Billy bites the inside of his lip and walks back across the room to put his car keys in his father's outstretched hand. "Go to your room," his dad says.

Billy walks past Max again, past Susan. He walks into his bedroom

and shuts the door behind him and then he sits down on his bed. He has some time, he thinks, before anything happens next. His dad likes to watch the last news of the night. Billy grabs his pillow and presses his face into it and he sits on his bed and he waits.

For a long time, nothing happens. Hours pass. Billy lies back on his bed and falls asleep with all the lights on.

All the warning that he gets is the sound of his bedroom door creaking open. He doesn't sit up fast enough to avoid getting dragged out of bed by his hair. "Dad--"

Always with the fucking walls, Billy thinks, still half asleep as his father slams him against it. He's still got Billy by the hair. Billy tries to make his body still, tries to loosen the tension he can't quite shake. He'd been sleeping and now he's--this.

"I'm going to find out where you were," his dad says, voice soft. "And if you were lying to me--" he doesn't need to finish the sentence. Billy thinks of Harrington's big brown eyes, lets himself really think about him for the first time since he'd walked through this door. His something good. He deserves that much, he thinks. This secret. He gets to keep it. It's his. *Fuck you*, he thinks, vicious, defiant, secret.

"I'm not lying, dad," Billy says. "I was with--she's nobody, okay? Her parents were out of town and I just lost track of time."

"Excuses," his dad says. The sound his head makes when the fingers in his hair smash it against the wall makes Billy feel a little dizzy, "Are for people who can't take responsibility for their actions." Another slam against the wall. Billy's knees feel weak.

He's on the ground, then. He knows it because he was vertical and now he's horizontal and looking up at his dad. One good kick, then a second. "Get up," his dad snarls. His voice is quiet. Billy doesn't know what time it is, but it's still dark outside his window when he pulls himself back to his feet.

Billy feels his lip split, his nose bleed, feels his father's ring catch high on his cheekbone. He doesn't count the blows because it never helps to know. Doesn't make a sound aside from the thump of his

body when he's on his fucking knees again, staring up. "I don't appreciate your excuses," his dad says.

Billy swallows blood and looks up at him. His father is rubbing his knuckles, adjusting the ring that's making the side of Billy's face hurt so goddamn much, making blood drip warm from high on his cheekbone. "You don't want to be in this house at night? Then you don't have to be." Billy's still on his knees, slumps forward so his hands take some of the weight. "Get up," his dad sneers. Billy can hear the disgust in his voice.

Billy stands.

"Now get out of my house," his dad says. Billy reaches for his jacket, relieved for the invitation to walk away. "I didn't say get your things," his dad warns, voice low with threat. "I said get out of my house. *Now.*"

Billy walks to the door of his bedroom. He wonders if this is it, if he's fucking done with this house--

"Dinner tomorrow night is at seven," his dad says. "Don't be late."

Billy shuts his eyes for a second. "I won't be, sir," he says and then he walks out of his bedroom and down the hall. He walks through the two rooms between him and the front door. He still doesn't have his keys, doesn't have his jacket. His nose is bleeding. The door of the house shuts behind him and he walks as straight as he can down the crumbling steps to the street. He looks at his car. He shouldn't have locked it.

At least now that he's outside he can spit out the blood, doesn't have to swallow it.

Billy's in jeans and a henley. At least he didn't take his fucking shoes off before he fell asleep. He shivers. In California, Billy thinks miserably, crossing his arms and shoving his hands under them even though it hurts to do it, that wouldn't be a fucking problem, the lack of a jacket. In California, April would have been beautiful, with an early sunrise, with a warm enough night.

In Indiana, April can get as low as the high thirties. Billy shuts his eyes and feels the hot sting of tears on his face and thinks *pussy* in his father's voice.

He walks. He can't stop looking behind him.

~

The next morning, Harrington finds him. Billy had known that he would, but wishes he hadn't. He'd sort of been hoping that Harrington wouldn't have his car back, yet, but then, Harrington had been sleeping at the Byers's house, and that's where the BMW had been waiting. Of course he has his car back.

It's just after sunrise. Everything around Billy is pale and pink and orange and green because spring is happening, or starting to. It's pretty. It's why Billy's ended up here, sitting with his back against a tree and his legs pulled to his chest.

"It's kind of a dick move," Harrington says, clomping through the trees and the leaves so loudly that Billy thinks he's probably waking up half the town. "Making me come out here."

"Maybe I was hoping you wouldn't come."

Harrington makes a soft, exasperated sound. "As if, Billy. Come on."

Billy's out at the farm on the edge of the world. He'd walked what felt like all night to get here. He's cold and he's sore and he's tired. He's so fucking tired. "Aren't you supposed to be babysitting?"

"Funny thing about that," Harrington says, and then he's standing right next to Billy. He doesn't sit. Just stands there, pulls even with Billy's shoulder. "Joyce didn't have to work this morning after all. She got called off."

"Weird," Billy says, even though he'd known she didn't need to work when he'd set it up so Harrington could sleep there last night.

"You're so full of shit," Harrington says. Billy shifts, leans to the side so that he's leaning more against Harrington's legs than the tree. He shuts his eyes and lets his head lull against Harrington's thigh.

Harrington's warm where they touch.

Harrington cards his fingers through Billy's hair and Billy flinches, jerks away, his eyes too wide and panicked, he can feel it. "Shit--I'm sorry," Harrington says, hand falling away.

Billy doesn't say anything at all. He settles his weight back against Harrington's legs and lets his eyes shut again. "You're here early," he says.

"Max called Joyce. Said you weren't there when she woke up."

"I left."

"Obviously," Harrington says. He nudges Billy with his knee and Billy straightens, stops leaning on him so much so that Harrington can drop down next to him. "Ugh," he says. "The dirt is wet." Billy's getting ready to lean up against his side, but Harrington's wriggling around too much for him to do it. Billy cracks his eyes open and finally glances at Harrington. Harrington's shrugging out of his fancy fucking peacoat, he's got it in his hands, but he falters, breath stuttering out when he gets a good look at Billy's face. "Holy shit," he says.

"Thanks," Billy says. "You really know how to make a guy feel special."

"Don't--" Harrington says, "Don't make fucking *jokes*, Billy. Holy *shit*."

Billy shivers. "It's not that ba--"

"Don't fucking say it," Harrington snaps, and then he's tugging Billy forward so he can put the peacoat around his shoulders. Billy pulls it tight around himself. It smells like Harrington. That's kind of nice. "Billy, how long have you been out here?"

Billy shrugs. "When I walked past the bank it said it was 2am. That was maybe an hour after I left the house."

Harrington's fingers curl into fists. He reaches out and smoothes lint down the sleeve of his jacket, the one wrapped around Billy, now.

When he speaks, Harrington's voice is tight, is shaking a little. "It is *forty-eight degrees* and *wet* outside," he breathes. "What the fuck were you thinking? Why didn't you come to the Byers's?"

Billy sucks in a slow, wet drag of air. His eyes are stinging. "I thought--" he says. "I thought he was following me."

He hears Harrington's sharp drag of breath, feels the hand that had been smoothing down the coat stutter to stillness. "Fuck," Harrington says, finally. "Fuck, Billy, come here--" and then he's got both arms around Billy, is pulling him in close, and he's warm and he smells good and Billy is so fucking *tired*. He shuts his eyes against Harrington's throat and shudders, feels himself crying before he can really stop it. Billy thinks of wet, April soil under his feet. Of the cold in his bones and the ache in his muscles as he walked, as he kept turning around, looking for headlights.

"You know," Billy says, pulling away after a few minutes and swiping at his eyes. It hurts when he drags his fingers over bruised skin, but he scrubs any evidence of *weakness* off his face anyway. "There was this--this fucking second when I thought he was kicking me out." He laughs, a little bitter. "I thought, hey, I'm fucking *done*, you know? Like that's it and I don't have to come back here, but then--" Billy's voice cracks again and he has to stop for a second, press his face into his hands. "He said, dinner's at seven tonight. Told me not to be late again. Gotta be on time for Susan's terrible fucking porkchops." Billy's still got his hands over his face. He just needs a fucking second.

Harrington runs his fingers through Billy's hair again and Billy flinches *again*. He flicks his tongue over his lip and swallows hard. "Can you--" he says, "Can you just--not touch my hair right now?"

Harrington drops his hand so suddenly that Billy startles. When Billy glances at his face, Harrington looks horrified. "I'm sor--"

"Don't be," Billy says. He can hear how tired he sounds. He tips his head back to look at the trees, the sky. "S'not your fault."

Now, though, Harrington's staring at his throat. "Are those--" he whispers, reaching out and pressing the tip of his finger against one

of the bruises, gentle.

Billy scoots away from Harrington's touch and keeps looking around them at all the trees. "I really didn't think you'd come looking for me out here," he says. "I wouldn't have come here if I'd known you'd do it. You shouldn't be out here."

Harrington makes a face at the change in subject, but lets it slide. He's looking around the trees. "It's different when it's the morning," he says. "I don't know. My brain doesn't register the trees as a threat when it's not dark, I guess?" he shrugs. "I don't *love* being here, don't get me wrong, but it's not--the same. Brains are fucking weird."

"Max needed help with her science last night," Billy says. "I think that's why I didn't get the shit kicked out of me right when I got home. I should've told her to write 'brains are fucking weird.' Probably would've passed the class."

"Mr. Clarke's tough," Harrington says. When Billy glances at him, he's smiling a little. "She should probably leave the 'fucking' out of her answer if she wants the best score."

Billy laughs. It's wet, but it feels nice.

After a long silence, Harrington says, "That used to be a riverbed," and he points at something in front of them. It doesn't look like it was ever a river. Billy can barely see it dipped into the ground, it's half full of dead leaves. "That's where I was when you found me all those months ago, out here," Harrington murmurs. He's talking so quietly, it's like he's telling a secret, but there's no one out here but the two of them and the trees. "I was right next to it. And there you were and I thought, I'm so fucked, but then--" he trails off and shrugs. "I said I was fucked up, you know. I pretty much warned you I was going to fall down into a hole, but you--you weren't what I expected. I'm--Billy, I'm so fucking glad that you weren't what I thought you were."

Billy swallows hard. "I was," he says, "What you thought I was. I was that person." *Not good*, his brain supplies. He wasn't good. Except--but now--

Billy reaches out and grabs Harrington's hand. "Can I tell you something?" he asks before he can talk himself out of it. He's staring at the dried up riverbed. He's remembering the night he followed Harrington out here in his car. Billy's got Harrington's hand in both of his. He's playing with his fingers.

"Course," Harrington murmurs. When Billy glances at him, he's got his head tipped back, looking at the sky.

"You remember when I told you that the counselor really liked my applications?"

"Yeah."

Billy looks away, back toward the river. "I wrote my essay about you."

"You *what*?"

"Well," Billy says. "Not--about you, exactly, but--no, it was about you. There uh, there was this philosopher a long fucking time ago--"

"What the *fuck*?" Harrington says, eyes wide.

Billy can't look at him. "Just--" Billy licks his lips. "Just listen, okay? His name was Diogenes and he used to walk all over the place with this lamp and say he was looking for one honest man," Billy says. "So this Irish guy wrote a poem about him. It's about--it's also about how people walk around looking for one just man and everyone is awful and fucked up, and you realize that you're fucked up too, and you're *not* honest and you can look and look and look, but it's never gonna fucking happen. You're not going to find it. You're going to look at yourself and realize you're fucked up and be fucking disappointed."

"Wow," Harrington says. "Thanks for that. I'm so touched--"

Billy snorts out a laugh. "Listen," he says, still looking straight ahead. "You--Harrington, I found it," Billy mumbles. He can't look at him when he says it. "I found that one--that honest man and it's you." Billy's staring off into the trees, the riverbed. "I wrote about how I've been fighting and breaking shit since I was fifteen. I wrote that I was looking for a honest man and I found one and that I'm learning to

be--better, to not break things." Billy shrugs, runs the pads of his fingers over Harrington's knuckles. "So I said that's why I want to go to college."

Billy finally glances at Harrington. For a second, his face is just--impassive, blank, and he says, "You--you said I'm--" and then stops talking, blinking.

"I used you as more of a metaphor," Billy hedges, looking away. He drops Harrington's hand and twists his own fingers together, chewing at his lip.

"That's the one that--"

"Doesn't use like or as," Billy says. Fuck. He'd thought it would be--it had felt important to tell him, but now Harrington's asking clarifying questions about *grammar* and Billy's just. He's so fucking tired. "Nevermind," he says. "It was stupid."

"Billy?" Harrington says. Billy looks up at him again and braces for impact, for losing another good thing just when he was starting to feel like he deserved this one, just when he had been standing in his father's house thinking *fuck you*, thinking *I get this one thing*.

"Yeah?" Billy says, when Harrington doesn't say anything at all, just keeps staring at him.

"I love you too."

Billy's jaw drops, which is good, he thinks a second later, because it makes it easy for Harrington to lick past his teeth, to cup his jaw--carefully, avoiding the bruised side--and angle his head so that he can drag his tongue across Billy's. Billy can't help the sound he makes, the need that starts somewhere deep in his chest and claws its way out of him.

Harrington pulls back, finally. Presses their foreheads together. For a few minutes they just breathe. Billy's whole body aches, but in a different way than it had when he left his house that morning. Harrington shifts in again, presses a kiss to the corner of Billy's mouth, and Billy's stomach curls up because he's never kissed anyone

like this. Their faces are still so close, he can feel Harrington's breath, the warm from his skin.

Harrington's fingers trace up his jaw, but they stay away from Billy's hair, and Billy loves him. He loves him so fucking much.

"Billy, your face is still bleeding," Harrington says softly. He's smiling, a little. He bumps his nose against Billy's, keeps one hand framing his face. "And it's fucking cold out here. And you have my coat, and honestly, I'm like, fine or whatever, but I'm not *thrilled* to be in this forest so can we go back to my house, please?"

Billy feels a little light-headed, honestly. He thinks it might be from all the times his dad smashed his head against the wall, but he thinks it might also be because Harrington said *I love you too* and kissed Billy like he was something good.

He'd said I love you, too.

Too.

Billy swallows hard. Harrington knows. He knows and he--*too*

Billy smiles back, shifts away, and stands up.

Or well, he sort of stands up. He has to lean against the tree, his legs wobble too much, and then he has to lean against Harrington as they walk back through the forest to the BMW. He's so tired, still, but he's warmer with Harrington's jacket on him, with the sun finally up behind them, making the air a little hazy with mist. Cold air, warm air, the fucking damp dirt floor of this fucking piece of shit forest.

Billy settles into the passenger's seat of the BMW and takes Harrington's hand without waiting for it to be offered. He thinks he probably doesn't have to wait for that. He curls his fingers tight around Harrington's and stares at the trees as they drive and he thinks he has let almost no one else drive him around, but he find himself in the passenger's seat of this car so fucking often, and he doesn't really mind.

Back at Harrington's, they go to the upstairs bathroom. "Take your shirt off," Harrington says. Billy whistles and winks, but he gets

nothing more than an eyeroll for his trouble. “Off, come on,” Harrington says, nudging Billy with his elbow. He’s got a bag of frozen peas in his hand that he’s wrapping in a towel. Billy yanks his henley up over his head.

For a second, he’s not sure which of the two of them makes the sharp, surprised noise. “Shit,” Billy says, finally. “It’s been a while since I looked like this, huh?” He turns a bit in the mirror, watches the way the bruises wrap around to his back. He’s got a nasty slice on his shoulder that he doesn’t really understand or remember getting. Billy looks up, “You gonna give me the peas or what, Harrington?” he asks. He’s looking for the highest leverage bruising, cataloging each separate ache on his skin.

Harrington doesn’t answer him, has gone absolutely white and rigid, his fingers curled into fists around the bag of peas, the washcloth. Billy frowns. “Harrington--”

“I’ll fucking kill him,” Harrington says. It’s mostly a whisper. Billy isn’t sure if he knows that he said it out loud.

“I’m oka--”

“No you’re *not*,” Harrington says, voice sharp. “Fuck, Billy--” He reaches out and splays his fingers over the bruising on Billy’s throat, fits his hand to the skin. Billy can see them in the mirror, Harrington’s hand on his throat. He remembers the night that Harrington got him from the hospital, when Billy had held him against the tree. This doesn’t look like that, doesn’t feel like that, this feels like his back against the wall, his dad too fucking close, breath on his face. Finers pressing into all the same spots.

Billy takes a step back, out of Harrington’s reach. “Don’t do that,” he snaps.

“Do what?” Harrington bites out. Billy just stares at him, jaw tight. It’s a long few heartbeats before Harrington hands him the peas. “I’m sorry,” he murmurs. “I just--you’re hurt.”

“S’okay,” Billy says, shrugging. “Shit happens.”

"It's not *fair*," Harrington says.

"Tell me about it," Billy says. "C'mon. Fix my face up. I'm too pretty to scar." Billy hops up to sit on the counter, reaches out to pull Harrington close so that he's standing between the V of Billy's legs. Billy's going for light-hearted, but it comes out a bit darker than he wanted. He feels a little off kilter in the face of Harrington's anger, his declaration that it isn't fair. It isn't, but it's life and Billy doesn't like to--to dwell on it. He hooks his ankles behind Harrington, pulls him a little closer.

"Put the peas on your bruises," Harrington says. His shoulders are still tense. Billy feels the gaze that locks on his throat again, slides up and down across the rest of the bruises. Billy squirms a little under his gaze, doesn't like the attention when all it's seeing is the damage.

"I'm up here," Billy mutters, leaning down and brushing his lips against Harrington's. "I can just do it," Billy says to the air between them when Harrington's expression doesn't clear, the tension doesn't droop. "You don't need to do this, okay?" Billy's dropping his ankles, already scooting back. Harrington's had a long few days and Billy'd dragged him out to the forest this morning like an asshole. He doesn't like seeing Harrington this upset. It's--it's weird. He doesn't fucking like it. "Really," Billy says, twisting to look at his reflection in the mirror. "I've got it. I've had worse."

"Hey, no," Harrington says. He rests his hands on Billy's knees, runs them feather light up his sides, careful. "No, you're not--" he hesitates for a second, hands at Billy's shoulders. "You're not doing it *alone*," Harrington finally settles on. He sounds, when Billy looks at him, a little exasperated, but also too honest. Billy meets his gaze and almost wishes he hadn't when Harrington says, "*You're* not alone, okay?"

Billy can't look away, even as his cheeks flush, even as he has to fight the urge to wriggle away, duck under Harrington's arm and bail in the face of all that honesty in this stupid fucking bathroom, both of them covered in bruises from different kinds of monsters. Not alone. "Okay," Billy says.

"I'm sorry," Harrington says again. "I just--it's hard to see you all--"

he motions at Billy's body. "I'll stop being so--" he pulls a face, teeth bared, and his cheeks flush. It makes Billy laugh, which surprises him because he doesn't--he's not a big *laugher*, only with Harrington around he can't seem to stop.

"Yeah," Billy says, finally. "Okay."

"Here," Harrington says, voice soft, resting a hand on the side of Billy's face. "Move your head a little--like this," and he puts his fingertips on Billy's jaw and angles it so he can dab whatever the hospital-smelling shit is he'd gotten out of the cabinet earlier on the gash from his dad's ring. Billy hisses. It fucking stings.

"Sorry," Harrington says. He drops the washcloth into the sink and uses both hands to smooth a bandage over the cut. Billy's got goosebumps all over his skin from the warmth of Harrington's fingers, the cold of the frozen peas. Harrington's fingers, when they skim over his skin, are so gentle Billy thinks he might die from it.

"How are you?" Billy asks when some of the anger has leached out of Harrington's eyes, when Billy's hands running over his shoulders have eased the lingering tension there. Billy's tired of talking about himself and his bruises. There's still purple bruising around Harrington's mouth.

"I'm--" Harrington pauses. "I was going to say I'm fine," he says, "But I'm not, you know? I had the *worst* fucking nightmares last night."

Harrington reaches up and touches his mouth, the bruises there. Billy thinks he might not realize that he's doing it. "And it was embarrassing to be that fucked up in front of the kids, but Will gets it, I guess."

Billy wishes he could have been there. He doesn't say that, though, because he couldn't have been there, and there's no point in either of them feeling guilty about it. He cups Harrington's cheek, instead, kisses him slowly, drags his mouth along those awful bruises and tugs Harrington closer. "You wanna go try and sleep?" Billy asks, and he asks because *he's* tired, but also because he knows Harrington probably is, too.

“Yeah,” Harrington murmurs.

They wind up in bed, kissing slowly, lazily, just a gentle drag of their mouths against each other. Billy pushes closer, presses his hips into Harrington’s and hisses out a breath when he realizes how hard they both are. He bites down on Harrington’s lower lip, groans in response to the quiet, needy noise Harrington makes.

“I--” Harrington says, lifting himself up on one arm and looking down at Billy. His mouth is red. Billy leans up, slots their lips together again.

“I want you to fuck me,” Billy says.

Harrington kisses him again, makes another sound that has Billy pushing closer, something twisting low in his belly. “Are you--” Harrington starts.

“Harrington,” Billy says, pressing their hips together again. Harrington moans and Billy smiles, “You got condoms?” he asks, “Lube?”

“In the--in the end table,” Harrington says, and his pupils are blown and Billy presses another kiss against his lips before he rolls over and digs around for it. “I’ve never--” Harrington says.

“I’ll help,” Billy promises. “Don’t worry.”

Harrington’s looking at him with his wide, stupid eyes, and Billy’s body hurts, and they’re both fucking bruised and cracking in two, sometimes, but Billy’s never felt more like he had someone in his corner. They kiss and press closer, and Billy lies back and catches Harrington by the wrist, spreads lube over his fingers, and guides Harrington’s hand between his legs.

It’s different than anyone else Billy’s ever been with. He can’t stop thinking about it as Harrington opens him up. He’s shy and nervous and vocal about both those things, but he’s also the kind of gentle Billy’s never known. Harrington curls his fingers when Billy tells him to, brushes them just right, and Billy arches up off the bed. “Fuck,” he says. “Right there--”

But then he's guiding Harrington again, and Harrington's pushing inside him, and it's so fucking *gentle* that Billy feels breakable, but not in a bad way. He's panting, hands scrabbling over Harrington's skin, and Harrington's gasping his name, louder than Billy'd thought he would be, all noises and praise, and Billy has never in his entire life felt this fucking good.

It's amazing, he thinks, after, with Harrington curled up around him, all the different ways a person can feel good. All the different ways that Billy's starting to feel *good*.

He hadn't known about any of them, not really.

~

Two weeks later, Billy's sitting in the guidance counselor's office, his best shit-eating grin on his face. He'd been late for history, yesterday. She's scolding him.

"So," Mrs. Williams finishes, sitting back behind her desk and clasping her hands together under her chin. "You should be hearing back from schools, soon. I just want to remind you, Billy. Don't mess this up."

Billy grins at her, "Aw," he says, "C'mon, Mrs. Williams. I'm a straight A student--"

"Who gets into fights and skips school and is *generally*," she leans forward, smiling, "A pain in my ass. But you're a great kid, Billy. College is going to open so many doors for you."

Billy shifts in the seat, suddenly finding it difficult to keep up the charm offensive. If he thinks too hard about getting accepted into college, he's going to start to want it. Billy knows better than to really want anything. He's still having trouble accepting that he wants Harrington. The thought of losing him sometimes keeps Billy up at night. He's lost a fucking lot. He'd really thought he was done with all the wanting. "Who wouldn't want me?" he asks, but the grin he plasters on his face feels a little empty.

She sighs and he knows she's seen through it by the way she says,

"I'd like to hear from you as soon as you know," with a soft smile.

Billy shifts again. "Sure," he says. The bell rings. "I gotta--"

"Don't skip class," she says, "I am *begging* you, Billy," but she's laughing.

Billy walks out of her office and nods at Tommy when they pass in the hall and thinks, hey, two weeks can do a lot for people.

It's been a little over two weeks since Billy crawled into a hole in the ground and pulled Harrington out of it. It's been just about two weeks since Harrington said *I love you, too* and Billy hasn't really said it back yet, but he thinks that's okay, because Harrington knows. Most of their bruises have faded, a couple of the bad ones still linger, but mostly they're all yellowing now, all faded or fading.

His dad is still suspicious, which Billy hates. He hasn't been sleeping at Harrington's, much, too nervous about midnight checks of his room, his dad finding him gone, his dad finding out where he'd gone to.

A few nights a week, though, Billy wakes up around three in the morning and climbs out his window and crawls in through Harrington's window--his parents have been around, off and on, Billy doesn't like his mom on principal because she threw away his pie--and slides into bed with Harrington. Harrington always bitches about the cold, always says he knows it's Billy because he smells like cold air and cigarette smoke, and Billy says *how many other people are crawling into bed with you at three in the morning* and then Harrington laughs and curls around Billy, presses in close, and they only get a few hours like that, but Billy thinks they both need them.

The nightmares, for Harrington, have been bad. There's nothing that Billy can do to protect him from that.

"Hargrove," Tommy says, catching up with him, having looped back around. "You coming to the party this weekend?"

Billy shrugs. It'll depend on what Harrington's doing this weekend, but he's not going to say that to Tommy. He spins the combo for his

locker, yanks it open, starts grabbing books. He almost misses it, the note, but it tangles up in his math textbook and starts to fall. Billy darts a hand out, catches it, confused. "Fuck off, Tommy," he says.

Tommy rolls his eyes. "I'll see you in science?" he says.

"Yeah," Billy answers. "Save me a seat."

"Will do, man," and then Tommy spots Carol and he's bounding off down the hallway. Billy watches him go, for a second, the way he throws an arm around Carol and smacks a kiss against her cheek that makes her squeal.

He glances back down at the note. When he reads it, he drops everything he's holding and takes off at a run. He doesn't even shut his fucking locker. Tommy doubles back, he finds out later, and puts Billy's shit away, shuts the locker for him, covers for him in the next class. Maybe, Billy will think later, he saw the look on Billy's face right before he took off. Or maybe he found the note, which Billy had dropped, too and thought it was weird enough to warrant being nice.

They found another tree, the note said in familiar, messy writing. Underneath, Harrington had written an address.

Billy checks the parking lot first, because if the BMW is still here then he can find Harrington in the school and kill him. But it isn't. Of course it isn't. That would be too fucking easy. "God *dammit*," Billy yells. He kicks a trash can over, fumbles in his pocket for his keys. He thinks, as he speeds out of the high school parking lot, feels the drag of air against his car as he takes a turn too fast, that he's going to fucking *kill Harrington*.

Unless something else does, first. Billy's stomach bottoms out and he tries and tries and tries to drive faster.

When he gets to the address, a farm he hasn't been on before, but knows, he's throwing the Camaro into park and scrambling out of it. He's desperate, barely remembers to turn the car off and take his keys with him. He has nothing, no bat, no crowbar, not even a fucking knife, and that's stupid, but he doesn't have any of that shit--Jesus, he needs to start keeping that shit in his *car* probably--and he doesn't

think there's time for a supply run when Harrington could be--could already be--

Billy doesn't try to hide from the farmer. It's the middle of the day. If he gets caught he'll fight his way out, he'll fight fucking anything right now if it means he gets to find Harrington. He runs out into the trees, looking every single direction.

Billy has never felt fear like this.

He rounds a huge tree, nearly crashes to the ground tripping over a rock, turns a corner and--

Harrington's standing there, at the bottom of a small hill, staring at a tree, his arms wrapped around himself and his face drawn and tight. Even from this far away, Billy can see that he's shaking. "Harrington!" Billy yells, scrambling a little to get down the hill without falling. "What the *fuck* were you *thinking*?" Billy's still yelling, but then he's there and he's got his arms around Harrington and he's dragging him back, back, back *away* from the tree. Harrington's fighting off his grip, shoves at his arms.

"Let me go!" he yells, finally wriggling away. He puts a few feet between them and they square off, panting.

"Are you stupid?" Billy shouts. Anyone could hear them. He doesn't care.

"No! God, fuck you Billy. You don't understand--"

"You could die!" Billy says. It's ripped out of him, too raw, too honest. "You could *die* and then you'd be *gone* and--and--" he stops, because he doesn't have an end to that sentence.

"I just wanted to see it," Harrington says. He's not yelling anymore, but he doesn't sound small, just tired, a little brittle. "I'm not fucking with these trees anymore, Billy. There's something still in Hawkins--"

"Then we call Hopper," Billy says, "And he fixes it with his government people. Come on, Harrington. You can't just go out here alone!"

“What else am I supposed to do?” Harrington asks him. “I’m not like you, Billy. I’m not going to college, but I can do this. I can make sure we know it’s coming. I can *watch*.”

Billy thinks of Harrington the first time he’d found him out in those trees. He thinks of every other trip out here, the urgency with which Harrington had always gone, like he was pulled into them, like he couldn’t help himself. *I’m fucked up* he’d said to Billy that first time, a thousand years ago. *I think I’m going to be cracked open and spill all my guts out, like fucking humpty-dumpty.*

Two weeks and nearly dying probably isn’t enough to override that urge, Billy realizes. Especially when nearly dying from fighting monsters had put Harrington in that position in the first place. There’s still a few feet between them. Billy closes the distance. “You don’t have to keep watch,” he says, pressing his forehead against Harrington’s. “You don’t fucking have to,” he says fiercely, “But if you want to--you’re not alone either, Harrington, okay?”

It’s a long moment, too long, *scary* long, before he feels Harrington’s hands settle on his hips. “Sure,” Harrington says.

“We do this right,” Billy says. “You don’t leave a fucking note in my locker. We do this right. You wanna fight the monsters? I’ll fucking fight them with you, but we do this right. We call Hopper.”

“Okay,” Harrington says.

“And in a few months,” Billy says, and he had long ago learned to stop wanting things, but recently he’s realized that he really wants this, “Whether the monsters are gone or not? We’re packing up and we’re fucking out of here.” Billy doesn’t know if he can make that promise, doesn’t know if he gets to leave this shitty town or his father’s house if he doesn’t get into college, doesn’t know what that fucking looks like, but he wants it to be true, and Billy apparently just can’t stop fucking *wanting* things, now. Billy frames Harrington’s face with his hands, leaves their foreheads together, sucks in a shaky breath, “I’m not going to let you crack open,” he promises, “You’re gonna be fine, sweetheart.”

Harrington’s eyes are closed, his body is rigid, he says, “Okay,” again,

but like he doesn't really believe him.

"We're both," Billy says, more confidence than he really feels in his voice, "Gonna be fine."

Speak things into existence, or whatever.

"Okay," Harrington says.

"I love you," Billy murmurs. "That's how I fucking know that, okay? Now show me this stupid goddamn tree so we can call the government."

Harrington laughs and pulls back. As they walk to the tree, Billy holds his hand, and he doesn't let go, not fucking once.

~

"That's fucking *cold*," Billy snaps.

"Stop whining."

They're on the couch in Harrington's living room. Billy's draped out over the cushions, his feet up on the coffee table. He's wearing a shirt, but it's hiked all the way up. Harrington is making him hold completely still while he artfully drapes packages of frozen food over a fresh round of bruises. It's closer to the end of May than Billy wants it to be and he's been on edge thinking about the fucking future. His dad thinks he's been too *mouthy* lately.

"I really think," Billy says, hissing out a breath, "The actual benefit of this is going to be negated by the fact that I'm going to freeze to death."

"You California boys," Harrington says, carefully setting another bag across Billy's ribcage. "No tolerance for cold at all."

Billy snorts, but he holds still. Harrington, he knows, needs to feel like he's doing something to help, so Billy lets himself be buried alive by frozen vegetables and focuses on the movie. Eventually, the bags are all in place, and Harrington settles down on the couch next to him, curls into Billy's side. "Jesus," Harrington says. "Those really are

fucking cold.”

Billy rolls his eyes. He’s just starting to wonder if there’s any popcorn in the house when the doorbell rings.

Harrington tries to hide it, but Billy sees the flash of fear on his face. Unexpected visitors carry the echo of government agencies, carry the echo of photographs. Sometimes Harrington’s nightmares aren’t just about monsters. “Stay here,” Billy says, sitting up and dislodging all of Harrington’s carefully placed vegetables. “I’ll get it.” Billy pulls the borrowed t-shirt back down over the bruises and walks to the door. His whole body feels numb. He’s not sure if it’s from the frozen vegetables or his own vague fear about the threat of government agents on the other side of that stupid, ostentatious door.

He pulls it open and has to adjust his eyeline and look down. The person on the other side of the door is smaller than he’d expected. Max is standing on the front step. They’re not best friends, or anything, but they’re all right. “Why are you here?” he asks. Then, “Are you okay?” because they’re not best friends, but he knows she fights monsters now, and he doesn’t really love that he hadn’t known it, before.

“Get out of the way, asshole,” Max says. She pushes past Billy into the house. “Steve?” she yells. “I’m visiting! Don’t be naked!”

Billy frowns, but follows her inside.

“In here,” Harrington calls. “Wearing clothes!”

Billy trails his step-sister into the living room. Max stares at the vegetables piled on the couch. “What--”

“It’s for the bruises,” Billy says, which makes her jaw snap shut real quick. He feels guilty about the look in her eyes, although he doesn’t know why. “Do you need something?” he asks to soften the sting of him being, generally, a giant asshole. He’s still working on it. He wonders for half a frantic heartbeat if he’s late for dinner, but when he twists to look at the clock, it’s only 6:15. He has time.

“I have something for you,” Max says. “I was worried Neil would--”

she pauses. "I don't know. I didn't trust him. Sit down."

Billy drops down onto the couch. Max sits on the coffee table. "I found them when I got home yesterday," she says. "I didn't--I didn't see you and then I didn't want him to know. I wanted--I was gonna give them to you last night but--" she stops, eyes wide. "He's an *asshole*," she says, voice vicious. Billy feels his ribs ache under his shirt. He wouldn't have given whatever it is to *himself* last night, honestly. Not with the way his dad just kept coming back around every time he seemed to get it out of his system.

Billy runs a hand through his hair, nods. "Yeah," he says. "What are they?"

Max glances at Harrington and then back at Billy. "I don't know if--"

"It's fine," Billy says. "He's fine. C'mon Maxine. Sometime today."

She reaches into her backpack and takes out a stack of envelopes. She's biting at her lip when she holds them out. Billy reaches for them, a little confused, pulls them into his lap and looks down.

"Shit," Billy says. He's afraid, all of the sudden, and it makes his back tense.

"What is it?" Harrington asks. He leans around Billy and tries to grab for the envelopes, but Billy pulls them out of his reach. He thinks, for a second, that he might throw up. He counts them, first, makes sure they're all there. Billy thinks of all the hours of shitty, late-night labor he'd done, mowing laws in fucking secret, picking up shifts at bars he was too young to work at in California, stashing away every penny that didn't go toward gas to pay to submit these. And now they're here. He counts them again. They're all there right now. In his fucking hands. "Billy?" Harrington asks, "What are they?"

It's Max who answers. Billy can't remember how to speak. He's just--he's staring at the stupid fucking envelopes. "They're from colleges," she says. "I didn't look at them," she adds quickly, snapping her eyes back to Billy's face.

Billy meets her gaze and thinks, not for the first time, that her eyes

look just like his, except maybe a little less fucked up. "Are you gonna open them?" Max asks, glancing back down at the letters he's holding. "We gotta go to dinner soon," she says. "I'm sorry. It took my forever to get here on my bike--"

"It's fine, Max," Billy says. Harrington hasn't said anything at all, but he kicks Billy's ankle then, a reminder. "Thank you," Billy adds. "For keeping them--safe."

He looks back down. Billy isn't sure he can do this. If he opens every single one of those letters and they're--and they say *no*, then every option Billy's been chasing through the waves in California, through the forests in Indiana? He can kiss those options goodbye. Then it's just him and his dad and that shitty little house in Hawkins, Indiana. It's dinner at seven and Billy can see no end in sight to that, if every single one of these letters say *no*. "I can't--" he starts. He thinks about his promise to Harrington, that they're gonna be fine, that they're gonna leave, and thinks that if these letters say *no* then he doesn't know what that means for that promise, if that means he has to break it.

Billy stands up too fast, sends bags of frozen vegetables skittering to the floor. "I need a second," he says. He walks through the house, out the back door, waits until he's out by the pool, sitting on a pool chair to look down at them again. He opens one. And another. And another. And another. On and on and on until the envelopes litter the ground around him, scuttle like dead leaves across the cement beneath his feet.

His hands are shaking.

He hears the slider open. "Billy?" he hears Harrington ask quietly. Billy looks up at him. Harrington meets his gaze and then he's scrambling, moving fast across the open space, landing on the pool chair next to Billy, pressing his hands to Billy's cheeks. "Are you okay?" he asks. "What did they--Jesus, Billy, you look like a *wreck*. Come back inside. It's--it's okay, we can figure something else out. We can--"

Billy can't breathe.

He looks at Harrington, at his big stupid brown eyes and his face that isn't bruised anymore. It was, though, Billy knows it. He remembers the purple around Harrington's mouth. He thinks of the photographs that made Harrington's hands shake. He thinks of standing out there in the trees with Eleven, slowly killing the monsters that still creep into Hawkins. Harrington doesn't do it alone, anymore. They have a schedule, a routine. Billy would burn every forest to the ground if it would make Harrington feel safer, but it wouldn't so they go out in teams to close the trees up with Eleven's superpowers, Billy and Harrington holding a bat. Billy loves that kid. He would do anything for her, and that's new like going to see movies with Dustin is new, like picking Lucas up from school is new, but none of it is bad.

And anyway, he thinks, It's slowing down, the monsters, that's what Joyce had said when Billy had come to her house at four in the fucking morning two nights ago because Harrington was sleeping there, sometimes, when Billy couldn't be around and he couldn't stand to be alone. She had stolen Will's radio and called him because it was four in the morning and Harrington was asking for him. Harrington never asks for him when he knows Billy can't really come. Billy had torn his shirt in his rush to get out the window, to get there.

He and Joyce had shared a cigarette on her couch, Harrington finally slumped and sleeping against Billy's side while they talked. She'd said, "It's slowing down, honey." She'd said, "Soon all those trees will be gone." She'd said, "There's a future on the other side of this, you know."

Monsters are real, Billy knows that. Harrington's still touching his face. Billy feels heat behind his eyes, tastes salt, listens to those white envelopes skitter away.

He thinks of the nights he still spends out in the trees, holding Harrington's hand, both of them still searching for the best version of themselves, the one that's not so fucking broken. It's slowing down, though. There's a future.

"They said yes," Billy whispers. He clears his throat, says it louder. "They said yes. All of them. They said yes."

"The riverbed, dried-up, half full of leaves.
Us, listening to a river in the trees."
-Seamus Heaney

Notes for the Chapter:

The poem that Billy talks about is Seamus Heaney's [The Haw Lantern](#), which was the framing for the entire fic from day 1. The title comes from the epigraph of the book that the poem was published in (although the working title was "The Haw Lantern" in my g docs).

The collection of poems was published in 1987, so some...fudging of dates has to happen, unless you choose to believe that Billy read a lot of lit journals and Heaney published some early version of it, which is my personal tinhat to make this work.

Anyway, this has been a wild ride and I had a ton of fun writing this fic. It's really been so genuinely heart-warming to get such a wonderful response to it. I hope that the ending is what you were hoping for!

Until next time, I'm @lymricks on tumblr too, screaming about poetry, these two, and The West Wing.